

HARMON
COOPER



DEAR
NSA

DEAR NSA

A Collection of Short Stories

By Harmon Cooper

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For free books visit:

www.harmoncooper.com

writer.harmoncooper@gmail.com

Twitter: @_HarmonCooper

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Here are two free, full-length books.

If these names mean anything to you – Hunter S. Thompson, William Gibson, William S. Burroughs, David Mitchell, Kurt Vonnegut, Phillip K. Dick, Karen Russell, Donald Barthelme – then you may like my new series, *Life is a Beautiful Thing*. This series is weird, it's fun, and it may be up your alley.

Reviews:

'Mesmerizing, dark dystopian thriller. The action never lets up.' - Amazon top 500 reviewer

'If Palahniuk wrote Trainspotting as a dystopian futuristic sci-fi, it would be this book...smart, funny, stylish, quick-moving, and cyberpunk-sexy.' - Amazon top 500 reviewer

'Strangely thrilling; imaginative and depressingly fresh, Cooper introduces a freakishly diverse cast of characters in a futuristic setting that is, sadly, a feasible reality in which to devolve.' -Liquid Frost, Amazon Top 500 reviewer

'This book will make you want to read the entire series.' - Amazon reviewer

'Imaginative and fast paced.' - Amazon reviewer

Want the books for free? Sign up for my reader's group [here](#) and I'll send you a free copy of each book. I love writing this series, and I'd love it if you joined me on the wild ride that is *Life is a Beautiful Thing*.

Want to check it out first? The first four chapters of Book One are at the back of this book, accessible from the Kindle menu above (Go To).

Thanks for the support and happy reading,

Harmon Cooper

Pedo Drew

Predator going door to door.

New neighborhood is new enough, old really, but so is everything in the festering subdivision. Drew's decision trails him like a bad odor. Like a filth, a stench, a rotten tear, a kick in the ass. *Knock knock knock*. Say the script. Continue on. It's the worst bet Drew's ever made.

Their eyes. Newcomers to the truth. Lift the veil over anything and watch it crumble. Ask a war vet, a heart-surgeon, an alien, a sinner. Their eyes suddenly grow pregnant with disgust and their mouths open like film canisters, agape at Drew's pedophilic confession. By the time their mouths shut, they're already planning their escape from Cherryview, the nicest neighborhood this side of I-10, the safest community in the county, the third safest county in the state.

Sure, Brons Pepperrock used to get into some disputes with his wife. Sure, they happened in their front yard enough times for the cops to wait down the street every Friday night. But still, at least Brons wasn't a kiddie toucher – just a drunk. And anyways, he's dead now. Fuck him. Cold in the ground with liver failure – liquor will do that to you.

Oh, and everyone knows that Mary Santis committed suicide after drowning her terrier in the public pool (yet no one knows how she got over the chain-link fence). Still, that's neither here nor there. Besides, the dog was old and Santis wasn't exactly young.

The point is – there are bad apples everywhere. But this Drew Higgins... Neighbors tremble when they look at the card he gives them. The name Matthew Harper, his parole officer, is scrawled across the front along with a phone number. This Drew Higgins has to go.

Behind closed doors they talk about moving. It's a bad time to sell,

not in this economy. Damn Republicans. Damn Democrats. Damn Tea Partiers. Damn government shutdowns. Damn sexual predators. Damn anyone that's not us. America is as safe as a minefield outside the seaside headquarters of the Taliban during a tsunami. No one is safe anymore.

The neighbors will watch Pedo Drew turn and careen sheepishly down their driveway through the peephole. He'll get smaller and the world will curve around him. That flannel shirt and the way he walks like he has a stick up his ass – that's definitely how a predator would walk. Definitely. And his haircut? Too pedo to comment here. Move along people, move along. Don't go anywhere near 728 Birch street, there's a bad man in there!

Within hours, people start parking their cars as far as they can from Drew's house. The trees across the street lean away from his side of the curb. The shrubs surrounding Drew's house uproot themselves. Even the garden gnomes head for safer grounds (and send postcards).

Weapons Nate begins building a trench around his house the following day. The old couple in 732 installs a pair of motion-activated flood lights even though they don't have any grandchildren. The family in 729 erects a camouflage deer blind near the recycling bin. The Starks in 740 keep their tiki torches lit at all hours.

A perpetual dark cloud forms over Pedo Drew's house and coughs up a bucket of rain every time he steps out the front door. At night, the streetlamps above Drew's house flicker. At night, eggs spring from their cardboard cartons into the grimy hands of local teenager, eventually finding a splattery home on his front door. At night, every bolt is locked.

Not more than forty-eight hours after Drew's door-to-door confession, a neighborhood meeting is held at the Pepperrock's. Blair Pepperrock takes the makeshift podium first and speaks of evil, non-redemption, the safety of her children (one of whom is currently in Juvie), the problems with the Feds, the necessity for life-long incarceration and the best way to install a razor wire fence.

The Guy Nobody Knows takes the stand next and offers discount martial arts lessons at his brother's Tae Kwon Do studio. He chops through a wooden board, and, most impressively, manages to slice through a watermelon with his bare hand. This brings applaud, as it should.

Next up is Weapons Nate to talk about guns and ammunition. A lifelong shooter, Nate brings with him an impressive array of killing devices to show the concerned crowd. He even has a bear trap, which he nearly loses his foot in while showing how to properly clean a flamethrower.

According to Weapons Nate, The National Firearms Act allows citizens to legally possess any fully automatic weapon manufactured before 1986. This includes mini-guns, antitank rifles, and if one can find it, a German V-3 Supergun – a World War II monstrosity capable of delivering a half-ton shell up to ninety miles away. Weapons Nate's enlightening presentation is followed by a quick prayer session led by Pastor Baker.

Pastor Baker calls on the Lord Jesus himself to keep a watchful eye over the Cherrywood neighborhood, and to protect them all from the iniquitous Pedo Drew. Fueled by his own fervor, Pastor Baker draws his hands into the air. He shakes his fingers at the trembling audience, yelps and stomps; he snorts hellfire and sweats holy water; he spits like the cobras on Noah's Ark and farts brimstone.

Towards the end of his sermon, Pastor Baker reminds the crowd that the church needs a larger parking lot due to the increased size of American vehicles. "Big enough for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost!" he jokes.

He finishes by reading from Luke 17: 2. *"It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones."*

"These 'little ones' mean children," Pastor Baker explains, after seeing a wave of confused faces. (His congregation has never been that bright.)

The pastor steps down from the podium and Rudy Harrison steps up. Rudy wants a pitchfork mob; Rudy wants flames, overturned cars, more refreshments at the next neighborhood meeting, death and dismemberment; Rudy wants families to please remember to turn off their porch lights if they aren't planning on handing out Halloween candy; Rudy wants life, liberty and justice, blind or otherwise. Beer-tinged saliva flies from his mouth as he tells the crowd about the Fed's conspiracy to plant pedophiles in every neighborhood to keep people afraid. With a crazed look in his eye he shouts:

"1984 is here! 1984 is here! Down with big government! Down with Pedo Drew!"

(Rudy hasn't actually read *1984* but he gets the point.)

Eventually, Rudy Harrison is led away by Pastor Baker with the help of Mr. Kim, the neighborhood's only Korean resident who looks pissed. (He always looks pissed because the neighborhood kids routinely target his house for toilet papering.) "Just relax, Rudy," Pastor Baker says.

"Let Rudy go!" someone shouts.

"That's right!"

"Let him speak!"

"Free country!"

"Not in my America!"

Inspired by his budding popularity, Rudy soars back into the room like a blind eagle. He transfers over the arms of Pastor Baker, Mr. Kim and Mrs. Pepperock. The neighbors carry Rudy to the other side of the room bearing his weight. They set him down carefully, and after a moment of bizarre silence, the crowd erupts in rip-roaring applause.

Ignited by the crowd's anger and his disdain for Pedo Drew, big government and unconscientious neighbors, Rudy grabs the closest item that resembles a pitchfork – a chimney broom – and strikes it in the air. The intensity in the room swells and the Stark's teenage daughter pulls out her smartphone to film the ensuing madness.

The following excerpt is taken from a thirty second YouTube video simply entitled, How to Start a Mob:

Rudy: Drew Higgins!

[Rudy holds the chimney broom high in the air.]

Gathered Crowd: Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!

Rudy: We're coming for you Pedro Drew!

Gathered Crowd: Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!

Pastor Baker: Now folks, let's settle down. Remember, we're Christians here. Only God is allowed to slaughter the Canaanites.

[The crowd goes quiet.]

Rudy: Let's raise some hell!

[The crowd hoots and hollers. Mr. Kim approaches Rudy from behind.]

Pastor Baker: Now, I know there are a lot of concerns here, and I'm not saying that they aren't warranted. All I'm saying is we should—

Rudy: Let's get him!

[Mr. Kim grabs Rudy from behind and tries to drag him away. Rudy responds by bucking his head back, sending Mr. Kim spiraling. The crowd cheers. Someone throws a bag of generic potato chips at Pastor Baker's face.]

Rudy holds the chimney broom in the air one more time and heads to the front door leading the crowd like a drum major. Rudy is the piper; he is the proverbial Paul Revere; he is the whistleblower; he is the trumpeter; he is the most demented man in the room.

Soon, an amoeba-like mob forms outside of Mrs. Pepperrock's house. The sky darkens and the streetlamps turn off. The Starks' tiki torches are passed out. Weapons Nate hands out stick grenades that he

bought at a World War II weapon's tradeshow six months ago. Real estate signs and other sharp neighborhood paraphernalia are plucked from freshly manicured yards and brandished.

Realizing that most of the people in the ravenous crowd are active members of his congregation, Pastor Baker grabs a garden hoe – ironically, the only person to actually wield something a member of a pitchfork mob might actually wield – and beats it against the side of an empty trashcan. The crowd turns to him.

With fury in his eyes and a garden hoe in his hands, Pastor Baker bellows from the depths of his reverent soul: *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God! Pedro Drew, down with thee!"*

The Guy Nobody Knows (later it's discovered that he actually doesn't live in the Cherrywood neighborhood) drags a wooden canoe out of the Pepperrock's backyard. Using his martial arts knowledge, he stomps on the keel until it gives way. The canoe splinters and the Guy Nobody Knows heaves a large hunk of wood above his head. He yells at the top of his lungs, "This is Sparta!" and everyone seems to agree.

In a gesture that wasn't planned but was likely inevitable, The Guy Nobody Knows swings the plank of wood behind him and strikes Weapons Nate in the neck, severely wounding the neighborhood gunnut. Rudy responds by jabbing his broom into the stomach of The Guy Nobody Knows.

The Stark's daughter manages to capture all this on video, but the audio is sketchy. In the ten second clip (YouTube: How To Attack Someone With a Broom), Rudy takes a swipe at The Guy Nobody Knows with his chimney broom. He connects with the man's chin and a tooth goes flying.

With a helping hand from Mr. Kim, who has taken the *if you can't beat them, join them* attitude, Pastor Baker climbs on top of a Buick parked in front of the Pepperrock's home.

"My friends!" the pastor cries from his vantage point above the crowd. "Do not fight amongst yourselves! Remember, we've gathered

here today in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ our Savior to combat pedophilia. We've gathered to strike down the groping hands of Drew Higgins!"

Rudy stops assaulting the Guy Nobody Knows for a second to take in what Pastor Baker has just said. "That's right!" Rudy calls back. "We're here to *take the power back!*"

"Blessed be the Lord, my strength, which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight!" Pastor Baker screams.

The crowd rallies behind Pastor Baker and Rudy the ringleader.

Weapons Nate is driven by Mr. Kim and the Starks to the emergency room – he still hasn't regained consciousness. The Guy Nobody Knows slinks away and Mrs. Pepperock locks herself in her house with a bottle of Maker's Mark. She watches the mob leave through the front window as she smokes a cigarette. Boys will be boys.

The angry mob arrives in front of Pedo Drew's house brandishing real estate signs, stick grenades, tiki torches and planks of wood from the Pepperock's canoe. It's a sore sight to see, blurry and furious.

Let it be known: all of this may very well have been necessary if Drew was indeed a pedophile. The problem is – he isn't. *Seriously, he isn't.* Drew Higgins isn't a pedophile. I repeat: Drew Higgins *is not* a pedophile.

Drew has never even been arrested, nor is he the least bit interested in child pornography. Hell, Drew doesn't even like children. He's opposed to the continuation of human life. He's a fatalist, a pessimist, atheist, he'll never marry, he's somewhat of a loser, he's a D&D aficionado, he can tell you every ore available on Minecraft.

No, Drew Higgins is the victim of a lost bet. An absolutely horrible lost bet.

"I've got an idea," Matthew Harper, Drew's rich friend said over a bucket of beer at the local Hooters two weeks ago.

"What's that?" Drew asked.

"If the Lakers win the playoffs, I'll pay off your mortgage," Matthew said. "If the Lakers lose, you have to go door-to-door on your street telling everyone you're a pedophile."

It was the bet that would forever change Drew's life.

"That's ridiculous," Drew said, halfway drunk. They were at a bar that catered to a high-class clientele. Girls in tight shorts and halter tops scooted around serving drinks and flirting. It might have been a strip club.

"You just moved in a month ago," Matthew said. "Everyone will believe it. Trust me. Trust me."

"That's the worst bet ever."

"How much do you owe on your house?"

"Close to 150K," Drew said.

"Sounds like a good bet to me."

"You're a sick man."

"It's easy money, Drew. You know I hate giving money away. Bets don't bother me though. Besides, the Lakers are favored to win. I'm doing you a favor here, really. I just want to up the stakes."

A compulsive gambler, Matthew had a habit of making high stake bets. In college he had to eat the cum cookie twice, take a bath in a tub filled with electric eels, wear a ketchup-covered camisole to his American Lit class, piss in the hallway leading to the dean's office, shave a penis into the back of his head, fondle a homeless man, eat his own vomit and light his hair on fire – all the results of lost bets.

In what might be considered one of his stupidest bets ever, Matthew bet his first wife that he could cheat on her quicker than she could cheat on him. This, of course, didn't play out in his favor because his wife was a bombshell, and Matthew was a stocky guy with tufts of black hair on the tops of his hands like a primate. The bet ended in divorce after Matthew grew jealous.

Too long didn't read – a bet was made between Drew and

Matthew, and the Lakers lost. Matthew was indeed serious, and he quickly had cards printed up that read: *Matthew Harper, Parole Officer*.

Worst bet ever.

Seriously.

In fact, up until he made the Laker's bet with Drew, Matthew had never actually won a bet against another person (aside from a couple of questionably successful Vegas runs where he had broken close to even). He was defined by his losing streak, his poor gambling judgment. The only thing he was good at was picking the right tech start-ups to invest in. And when Matthew made the bet with Drew, he didn't actually expect to win. He only wanted to keep things interesting. Regardless, a bet is a bet and the rules must be observed.

Enter Drew Higgins. Yes, this story is about Drew Higgins, but it has skipped around up until this point. The only reason Drew even took the bet is because, well, \$150,000 is a lot of money. The Lakers were predicted to win, five to one. Would you take the bet? Think about it.

Worst bet ever.

"There's a freaking pitchfork mob outside my house!" Drew yells into his phone. Outside, Pastor Baker waves his garden hoe in the air. People scream and chant; Rudy the ringleader appears to be beating his fists across his chest. Lightning strikes in the sky above. Gruesome shit.

"How many people are there?" Matthew asks.

"Maybe twenty-five. They think I'm a pedophile. Damn this bet!"

"Well, open the door and tell them you aren't."

"Who's going to believe that? I need your help, man!"

"Don't panic," Matthew says. "Tell them to call me. Tell them to call your parole officer. I'll set this straight!"

A rock from the Stark's Zen garden comes flying through the window and crash lands in Drew's living room.

“Matthew, they’re throwing rocks!” Drew drops the phone.

Afraid for his life, he runs into the kitchen where he trips over his own feet, falling just in time to hear an explosion rock the living room. The blast force spins debris into the kitchen. Drew pulls himself up and opens the backdoor.

Much to his dismay, Pastor Baker and the rest of the mob have forced their way into his backyard. In an act of bravery that would cost him his life, Drew raises his arms high into the air.

“Stop!” he screams, trying to part the waters like Moses.

Pastor Baker readies his garden hoe. Rudy is next to him with the chimney broom. The crowd waits in hungry anticipation for someone to say something.

“Please, it was a bet, a horrible bet. I’m not really a—”

But Drew is too late. A real estate sign comes flying from the crowd and pierces Drew’s heart.

A day later, all the pitchfork mob members are arrested for manslaughter. The police discover the fake parole officer card and arrest Matthew Harper for impersonating an officer of the law.

In the months that follow, most of the pitchfork mob members are sentenced to jail. Pastor Baker becomes a prison chaplain and uses his oratory skill to convert hundreds of inmates to Christianity. Ironically, neither Rudy nor Weapons Nate end up doing any jail time, even though Nate supplied the stick grenades, and Rudy is the one who started the mob.

Pleading insanity, Rudy the ringleader is committed and spends the rest of his life pretending to be a vegetable. Rudy likes being a vegetable. It’s much easier than being a human. Weapons Nate goes out the old fashion way: a game of Russian roulette with some surly Puerto Ricans on a boat in international waters.

Drew Higgins is given a martyr’s burial, attended by Vice President

Joe Biden and one of the lesser known Bushes. A year later, a Hollywood biopic starring George Clooney as Drew Higgins is filmed and goes on to win the Academy Award for best picture. The film, *Predator: The Drew Higgins Story*, ends with Clooney fighting the crowd with an umbrella and speeding away in a red Porsche to find and kill Matthew Harper.

In real life, Matthew Harper gets off with a misdemeanor charge and fifty hours of community service. Money really can buy freedom. For his community service, Matthew flies to Hawaii to take part in a land reclamation program, which counts towards his community service. It's in Hawaii that Matthew bets a local that he can outswim a tiger shark. It's the last bet Matthew will ever make, the best meal the tiger shark will ever have.

To this day, no one knows who threw the fatal real estate sign that pierced Drew Higgins heart.

DEAR NSA

On Tue, Oct 8, 2013 at 11:21 PM, <leah.moloch@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear NSA,

Hey, it's me again. Still no reply? Oh, it's cool. I know things have been crazy lately with the government shutdown and all. Whatever. I'll be patient.

I guess I might as well update you on what's been going on around here: after suffering from a strange whooping cough, Chester put some Vicks VapoRub on his testicles and he's now in the ICU (for the third time this year). He will undergo a skin graft operation tomorrow and we may never be able to have children again. We will be OK, I guess. Two kids are enough if you ask me (I wish you would tell this to people in third world countries, but that's just my opinion).

I keep forgetting to tell you—our neighbor, Jack Rankins, has been shooting his guns off in his backyard. I assume you know about that, but seriously, there's a playground behind his house and it's dangerous to shoot during the daytime.

Once, Jerry and Susie were playing when a bullet whizzed past and dinged into the playscape thingy. You know, the one with the yellow slide. You can see it (just use Google Maps and look next to the playhouse with the red roof). Well, the damn bullet bounced off the slide, flipped up into the air, and landed in the sandbox, inches away from the Norwood's baby. Inches! You should keep an eye on this nutzo.

Yesterday, I got an e-mail from Yahoo! saying someone in Utah has been trying to access my account. Could it be you, my secret NSA crush? I made the password especially difficult. I'll give you a hint: Frederick Douglass (more hints to follow).

Also, just so this e-mail gets flagged: bomb, death to the US Government, attack, I want to kill the president, Jihad, Tea Party, heroin, C-4, anthrax.

Talk to you soon,

Leah Moloch

On Fri, Oct 11, 2013 at 9:07 PM, <leah.moloch@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear NSA,

Are you purposefully ignoring me? Because if you are, that's really, really messed up. I mean, how many e-mails do I have to send just to get a single reply? A girl shouldn't have to try this hard.

You know what, forget about it. Whatever. I'm not trying to piss you off or anything. Sorry for bringing those things up. I always get frustrated sometimes when I type. Add two cups of black coffee and I'll say just about anything to anybody.

As you already know, Chester had to have his testicle removed.

I don't know if this is normal or not, but the doctor let him keep the testicle in an old mason jar, which now resides on our mantelpiece. I hate looking at the slimy thing every morning while watching *Fox & Friends*. Men are so obsessed with their balls. It gets old.

I should probably just put this out there: my nephew (Facebook ID: Michael Rosenboom) is definitely up to something much worse than occasionally smoking a doobie. He has been asking me all sorts of questions about the chemical that the Russians used to poison that spy a couple of years ago (Google: Russian spy poisoning and look for the guy with the Shrek face).

My nephew claimed it was for an experiment. He said that he was trying to synthesize a new kind of low calorie sweetener or something. Personally, I think it's a cry for help, and not a Britney Spears after she shaved her head or a Miley Cyrus after she became a whore type of cry for help. No, I think my nephew Michael is up to something.

Anyways, I know it's none of my business, but it is your business, so you'd better check into it.

Still haven't cracked my password yet? I see that you've tried to hack into my Yahoo! e-mail address yet again. If you want a lady who gives it up that easy, you're barking up the wrong tree (or better, hacking into the wrong e-mail account lol). *I've never given it up that easy.* I mean, it took Chester almost three weeks just to get my shirt off. That's a lifetime to kids these days!

I'll give you one more hint about my Yahoo! password: Christina Ricci.

Also, just so this e-mail gets flagged: dirty bomb, nobody will find out, cover up, kill Pelosi, big trouble, assassination.

Ciao,

Leah Moloch

On Mon, Oct 14, 2013 at 2:26 PM, <leah.moloch@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear NSA,

I'm feeling lonely. I'm feeling sad. I'm feeling like I shouldn't have married Chester. I know I shouldn't have married Chester. He's a slob. He's a bad mechanic. He's slightly bald. He constantly smells like grease and orange goop. He lugs his dirty feet into the kitchen and releases loud, garlicky burps that stink up the entire house. *Now he only has one testicle.* Lance Armstrong only had one testicle and look what good he did!

Ok, that's not fair to testicular cancer survivors. Besides, we both know how much men value their 'family jewels' as little Jerry calls it. At least Chester didn't cheat like Armstrong, and if he did, I'd expect you to tell me. In fact, I wonder if you knew all along that Armstrong was cheating. I bet you did. You seem to know everything, NSA.

So you're obviously still ignoring me. What's a lady got to do to get some surveillance around here? Jokes don't really help if no one's laughing at them. :-(

Oh, so I guess you think I've been sounding a little pathetic lately? You know what? *You're pathetic*. You're the one that hasn't responded to a single e-mail I've written all year. *Not one single e-mail*. Is fighting terrorism really that hard? Is spying on foreign governments really that time consuming? No words for a secret admirer in Alabama? Whatever.

You think you're so high and mighty sitting in your data collection center in Utah, monitoring phone calls and looking through people's e-mails for naked pics. That's what I'd do anyway, if I were a man.

What am I saying? Honey, I know you've been busy, trust me, I'm not naïve. America is either always at war with someone, or about to be at war with someone else. I get it. Still, we are better than Russia and still, this doesn't mean you can just ignore me.

Chester never ignores me. Sure, he may be a greasy, one-testicled idiot, but at least he'll sit there and say, "Yea baby, sure, you're right," which is more than I can say for you. I guess he's not so bad.

It looks like you *have* been paying attention to my nephew, Michael. Were you the one who sent federal agents to his apartment to arrest him yesterday morning? Channel 9 News said he has been taken to some facility outside Montgomery. What did you find? Care to share any info? Also, you can at *least* say thanks. I'm the one who tipped you off, remember?

Also, just so this e-mail gets flagged: hostage, enriched, Somalia, target, shoot Harry Reid, Iraq, ammonium nitrate, terror.

P.S. Here's another Yahoo! password hint: Abraham Lincoln.

Love,

Leah Moloch

On Wed, Oct 16, 2013 at 5:18 PM, <leah.moloch@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear NSA,

Not even a thank you?

I sit here and tell you about my nephew Michael and you can't even say thank you? Yes, Michael was planning to infiltrate the local Wal-Mart after disguising himself as a door greeter. Yes, Michael was planning to poison the newest shipment of broccoli with radioactive polonium-210. Yes, he then planned to take over the store and offer rollback prices that would benefit the local community and not the shareholders.

Sure, his idea was deadly, but only for people who actually ate broccoli. In fact, this may have been the greatest flaw in my nephew's plan. He assumed that most of the employees ate broccoli because of its high levels of vitamin C and vitamin A. What he didn't take into account was that many Wal-Mart employees are on food stamps even with full-time work, and most don't spend their money on broccoli, opting instead for McDonald's, Hungry Man TV dinners, and/or day-old donuts from the in-store bakery. Also, and maybe you can shed some light on this, I still don't see why he was targeting employees in the first place. It's not their fault they work for Wal-Mart.

But enough about Michael, this e-mail is about us NSA, you and me.

Yea, you might think you can just ignore me indefinitely, you might think I represent the under-educated American who never amounted to anything aside from assistant managing a Sonic, but I'm here to tell you—I won't go down without a fight. Just like Reagan, I'll always believe *it's morning in America*. And just like Bush, *You can't fool me twice*.

Is this how you treat every woman you've been with? I sure as hell hope not! It's men like you that give the male species a bad name. Oh, and I'm not lonely or anything. Hardly. I mean, I have Chester, for what it's worth. And it's true, Chester has his testicle problem and now he's off the wagon again, but that doesn't stop him from loving me and cuddling me every night. At least someone cares. Whatever. Don't respond. I just won't write anymore. No sense in wasting my time. Go to hell NSA.

I almost forgot: build bomb, Taliban, nuclear, Al-Shabaab, suicide

attack, stab Obama, chemical weapon.

Sincerely,

Leah Moloch

On Tue, Oct 22, 2013 at 6:51 AM, <leah.moloch@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear NSA,

Hi.

Sorry I haven't written in a week. I've been busy (you know). About the message last week, I was just a little angry and severely caffeinated. I'm over it now. No sense in keeping a grudge, besides, I'm not going to lie, I missed you.

Did you miss me? You don't have to say anything. A lot can be said in silence. You know you can say something when you're ready. What would have happened if Sleeping Beauty had got tired of waiting for Prince Charming? The story wouldn't be so magical, that's for sure. So, I'll wait for you, my mysterious NSA lover.

No pressure. Just be yourself.

Michael isn't looking so good on the news. What are you guys doing to him? I mean, sure, my nephew was planning to kill loads of people, but that doesn't mean you should treat him inhumanely. What's the point in that? He looks like he's lost fifteen pounds. Seeing as how I am the one that tipped you off, you could at least give him a steak every now and then (medium-rare, garnished with green onions). It's the right thing to do.

Before I forget, I've received a few e-mails over the last week saying that there have been several more attempts to hack into my Yahoo! e-mail account. You really aren't as good as you think you are, NSA. I mean, I've given you three clues: Frederick Douglass, Christina Ricci and Abraham Lincoln. How many more hints do you need?

Will Michael Jordon or Justin Timberlake help? Look there! Two clues in one e-mail! I'm being generous here. Really, I am. As if you

don't owe me enough already. Anyways, I'm not trying to force you into anything, or whatever. Just e-mail me when you get a break, I know your job can be exhausting.

Also, just so this e-mail gets flagged: car bomb, Hezbollah, weapons cache, terror, surgically implanted explosive device, cyber-attack.

Sincerely,

Leah Moloch

On Tue, Oct 22, 2013 at 12:45 PM, <customercare@nsa.gov> wrote:

Dear Mrs. Leah Moloch,

Greetings from the NSA data center.

Sorry it has taken us so long to get back to you, we've been playing catch up ever since the government shutdown. Two weeks is a long time to basically halt all investigative operations worldwide. Luckily, members of Congress have finally come to an agreement, and we're up and running again for the time being. Let the espionage begin! (It's a joke we like to say around here.)

About your husband's testicle: losing a testicle is a traumatizing experience most men can't adequately handle. Our brother lost his testicle after a weed whacker went haywire and backfired on him. He lost his left leg too. Sad, really. He was never the same after that, ask any of us. Now he lives in Alaska, where he collects disability checks and makes art using his stub leg. The art is really nice, but the colors are sad. He is constantly on our mind.

Unfortunately, we have no say in how your nephew Michael is treated. We are a research-based institute, not a corrections facility. Also, it wasn't you who tipped us off. No, the person responsible for giving us the information that led to your nephew's arrest was none other than your husband, Chester. Shocking, we know, but Chester is smarter than you think.

Regardless of how you feel about him when you're angry, Chester

is a real patriot and American lives have been saved due to his diligence. The next time you see his testicle on the mantelpiece, you should be reminded of this. That testicle represents freedom and democracy.

To be honest with you – which we shouldn't, but you've opened up to us and we feel obliged to respond – most of us here at the NSA are contract workers. Remember, the American Government is vast and multifaceted, and the person who hands you your latte isn't the same person who made it, nor are they the same person who rang it up, nor are they the same person who filled the pitcher with milk, nor are they the same person who pressed the steam button, nor are they the same person who loaded the espresso into the machine. Think of us as a giant, industrial Starbucks with three times as many managers as we have employees.

Your e-mails have been a source of concern here at our offices due to their sad and potentially threatening nature. Also, it should be noted that we weren't the ones trying to hack into your Yahoo! e-mail account. Actually, it was someone from the Internet imageboard website, 4chan, who intercepted one of the e-mails you sent us over the summer. Apparently, your e-mails have since become an Internet meme (Google: Dear NSA meme). Congratulations on your newfound internet fame! Use it wisely.

As for your Yahoo! password: It's Aquarius. All the people you listed are Aquarians. If you want a difficult password to crack, try using a password generator. Just a helpful hint.

You know, contrary to what many people believe, we here at the NSA offices aren't really the bad guys. Sure, we spy on people; sure, we read through the e-mails sent between EU offices; sure, we listen to Angela Merkall talk on the phone; sure, we know what you made for dinner last night and what you plant to make for breakfast the next morning; sure, we are trying to have Edward Snowden assassinated. But the point remains – we do this solely for your safety. *We spy because we care.*

Think of us as a loving father who snoops around while you're

sleeping, but still buys you awesome birthday gifts (like that iPad we bought you last year with your federal return), and generally has your well-being at heart. We keep our eyes on you so you don't have to. Think of us like a 21st century Mr. Rogers.

We care about you, Mrs. Moloch. We care about Chester's living testicle and your two adorable children, Jerry and Susie. We even care about your nephew Michael, even though he'll likely spend the rest of his life in timeout. We care about your neighborhood, the Sonic you work at (love that Chili Cheese Coney!), and the entire state of Alabama. We care about all the states, even the ones that aren't officially states (like Puerto Rico, American Samoa, Iraq and Afghanistan).

People criticize us here at the NSA, but that's only because we can be a little overbearing sometime. Most good parents are. Maybe that's what went wrong with you, Mrs. Moloch. Maybe, your mom and all her boyfriends and your dad with his 1980s cocaine problem and his obsession with muscle cars and handlebar mustaches negatively affected the outcome of your life. Maybe it was your late 90s love of pop punk or that steamy sex tape you made in college (also available online/check Pornhub's amateur section), or the mental breakdown you had in 2003. Who are we to say? It's just what our research indicates.

Oh, but we're getting ahead of ourselves, let's just end this e-mail by reminding you that we care. Really, we do. So keep up the good work, and if you see any more of your family members doing anything suspicious, please drop us a line. We'll be waiting, or more accurately, we'll be watching.

Looking forward to your reply,

Your friends at the NSA

Tips for a DEA Sex Party

Dearest Reader,

The following **top secret slides** are best viewed in Landscape Mode, adjustable in the main menu above. Do it now.

Landscape mode.

Landscape mode.

Let's begin.



TIPS FOR A DEA SEX PARTY

A SLIDESHOW PRESENTATION BY AGENT SMITH
(CLASSIFIED)



HISTORY (LEARNING FROM BOGATA)

Before we begin, it is important to review what we've learned thus far from our previous mistakes:

- DENY EVERYTHING no matter what you are accused of.
- Prostitutes are never really prostitutes even if they tell you they are prostitutes. Remember, not knowing they were prostitutes will go a long way if OIG (Office of Inspector General) rears its ugly head.
- No romantic relationships with alleged prostitutes, fugitive's spouses or anyone you may be training. Keep it simple people.

ATTENDING A SEX PARTY

- Bring the host a gift, preferably a mantle piece. I recommend an eagle sculpture because it shows you are a true patriot. Make sure it isn't too bulky though.
- If offered any type of drug, partake within reason (exceptions apply, more later).
- Don't worry about bringing contraceptives as these are generally provided by the host (see Hosting a Sex Party slideshow, available on the shared server). Keep your pockets empty because escorts are known to steal.

HOSTING A SEX PARTY

- Personally test all the condoms by filling them with water *before* distributing them.
- Make you have plenty of appetizers. My favorites are bacon bites, tiny chocolate chip cookies, pickles and little cubes of cheese.
- Alcohol.
- Alcohol (make sure you have a back-up supply hidden somewhere. This is key!)
- Make sure there are available places for romance to occur. Keep the lights dim, the mood light and the music bumping.

HOSTING A SEX PARTY CONTINUED

- In case of emergency, make sure you have a weapon capable of defending yourself.
- If there are damages to the building/hotel's property, bill the US Government as careful as possible. With the right finagling, any fund can be covered up.
- Make sure to set up video feeds in every room, just in case there is a murder or an agent needs to be coerced at a later time.
- Don't forget breakfast in the morning. Most agents prefer pancakes, but some are on gluten-free diets these days so be prepared for anything.

HOSTING A SEX PARTY CONTINUED

- In case of emergency, make sure you have a weapon capable of defending yourself.
- If there are damages to the building/hotel's property, bill the US Government as careful as possible. With the right finagling, any fund can be covered up.
- Make sure to set up video feeds in every room, just in case there is a murder or an agent needs to be coerced at a later date and time.
- Don't forget breakfast in the morning. Most agents prefer pancakes, but some are on gluten-free diets these days so be prepared for anything.

SEX WITH A COLLEAGUE

- Sex with a colleague is a great way to promote teamwork.
- Both parties must ejaculate. Equal footing is everything.
- Sex with a boss is different than sex with a colleague. Be careful when fornicating with upper management, no matter how persuasive they may be.
- Do not have sex with someone you are training, even if you are trying to "train them" how to have sex.
- Do have sex with a colleague and a prostitute at the same time. Studies show that this is a great way to build camaraderie.

I'VE BEEN CAUGHT! WHAT NOW?

- Have no fear, if you are caught by the OIG, an NGO, a rival cartel or any other entity looking to meddle in your affairs, remember to deny any and all allegations.
- As soon as you can, destroy your Blackberry, laptop, iPhone or any other device that could incriminate you. Keep your cool. Don't pistol whip anyone or threaten them in any way. Remember, the calmer you look, the less it looks as if you are guilty.
- Wait at least three weeks before you attend another sex party. Use your imagination to relieve yourself of your sexual needs during the interim period.

THINGS TO SAY (WRITE THESE DOWN)

- The following is a list of things to say if you are caught:
 - It wasn't me.
 - Sex party? What are you talking about? I just came for the refreshments.
 - The only person I've ever had sex with is my wife. This isn't a sex party, it's a toga party!
 - "I did not have sexual relations with that woman."
 - I have better things to do than attend a sex party. Our great nation's security is at stake and YOU COME TO ME WITH THIS?

WHAT NOT TO SAY (DON'T FORGET!)

- The following is a list of things **not** to say:
 - I'm sorry for coming to the sex party.
 - I was tempted by the flesh. IS THAT SO WRONG!?
 - I'll never do it again, I promise.
 - This isn't a prostitute, it's my girlfriend.
 - A man has his needs.
 - Sex parties aren't as nefarious as they seem. You should go to one sometime. I can invite you to the next one if you want.
 - It's OK, I checked my weapon at the door.

DRUGS TO DO, DRUGS NOT TO DO

- Stay away from hallucinogens (mushrooms, acid, ayahuasca, DMT).
- Uppers are your friends (i.e. Cocaine) as long as it isn't meth. Don't become a methhead.
- Mixing marijuana and cocaine isn't ideal, but it is fun.
- Don't do heroin.
- Seriously, don't do heroin.
- Things to smoke – cigarettes, blunts, spliffs and joints.
- Things not to smoke – crack, meth, human hair, PCP.

BONUS SLIDE – DEALING WITH CARTELS

- Don't call anyone in the cartel the word *puta*.
- Keep a weapon on you at all times, even if it is hidden in your rectal cavity.
- Remember, cartel members can be as harmless as they are dangerous. Judge accordingly and always be alert.
- Don't ask them if they have any single aunts, sisters or cousins. Keep things casual, but not that casual.
- Do as many drugs as you can with the members within reason. Remember which drugs to avoid!
- No secret handshakes.

CONCLUSION

- Remember – keep it in your pants. (Just kidding!)
- You have a serious job and you should be allowed the freedoms provided by federal law. This does not include free access to prostitution, but maybe it should.
- The most important thing is to deny everything.
- If you happen to get an STD, handle things discreetly.
- Learn from the mistakes made in Bogata. History needn't repeat itself!
- For any questions, send an encrypted email to agentsmith_sexquestions@DEA.gov

THANK YOU!



Email: agentsmith_sexquestions@DEA.gov

The Internet Kill Switch Fiasco

What began as a simple post to garner “likes” quickly grew into something no one could have seen coming. The following is an overview of the Internet Kill Switch Fiasco, its belligerents and the aftermath, with the hopes that it will be studied by future generations. For those needing clarification, notes have been provided.

The Beginning of the War

Broderick Healy went by the name Bruno in high school in Vermont and by the name Brody at MIT, where he created a 21st century version of *Spacewar* in which a small rocket shaped like the Facebook logo fired at random Instagram pictures, producing celebrity tweets as a reward for high scores. The term outsider need not be used to describe him as it is obvious he was an outsider. [\[1\]](#)

Healy developed a small following of hackers with his first blog. Then he created a hybrid blog he called Frogfeet that linked to various social media pages. From there, he expanded Frogfeet to an invite-only website that hosted a stream of user-generated content showcasing trending stories, videos, photos and what was called “ponding”. Pondering allowed users to use the GPS in their electronic devices to see who was “frogging” nearby. Frogfeet wasn’t the first service to do this, but it blew most users away by connecting them with people that had been cross-referenced based on a number of criteria including age, religious beliefs, likes and biases. It was a great hook-up app. Naturally, Frogfeet was purchased by Google after having a forty billion dollar bidding war with Facebook and Microsoft. [\[2\]](#)

It should be noted that Healy himself wasn’t very popular on Frogfeet. No one cared if he was frogging nearby. As primitive as it

may sound, the people most famous at the time included teen celebrities who posted pictures of their newest tattoos, comedians who excelled in genitalia-based jokes, internet sensations fond of one second videos they called “fasts” and socially-charged musicians who commented on things they knew nothing about. Healy, a boring outcast if there ever was one, was easily overshadowed by these competing characters even though he’d created the outlet for them to reach their audiences.[\[3\]](#) He was less Zuckerberg and more Thiel sans the near Randish levels of libertarianism. Regardless of his invisibility at the height of FrogFeet’s IPO, Healy would soon dominate them all.

His strategic strike against the world started with a Facebook post about how he had been diagnosed with cancer. He chose not to post this message on Frogfeet, as he wanted to prove that he was amiable with Facebook even though his company had been purchased by a competitor. It was a move that would win him some likes; a move that would also garner him some cross-platform followers. It was also the move that started the war.[\[4\]](#)

His “cry for sympathy” was shared by two of his closest friends,[\[5\]](#) 4Chan hackers known only as RedPill and BluePill (more on these two misfits later). This subsequent plea was tweeted and shared. There have been detailed analyses of Healy’s posts, the most notable of which is Jonathan Fistmonk’s, *Cancer and the Domination of Healy*. There have also been disputes as to the effect of Healy’s fake-cancer posts. I will leave this debate to the experts and continue with an overview of the fiasco.

During high school, Broderick Healy was a Photoshop expert. He’d run multiple regional awards, including the Cincinnati Photoshop contest and the much coveted, Bristol Photo Manipulation Award. Using his skill of photographic manipulation, Broderick was able to drop his body weight by nearly 175 pounds (79.3 kilos), manipulate his skin color and remove all the hair on his head to appear cancerous.[\[6\]](#) This picture became the most shared photo of 2019.

He quickly gained international sympathy with his Photoshopped photos. Once his popularity began to take off, people from his

childhood naturally began to question the legitimacy of his claim.[\[7\]](#) That's when the proverbial war started.

Similar to Wayne Knight's role in the 1990s classic *Jurassic Park*, Healy loved to taunt people. When he was thirteen, he invented an app that could turn people's phone alarms on remotely. He would routinely wake his parents and his brothers up at all hours, laughing with his blanket pulled over his head.[\[8\]](#) It is said that this later drove his brother to suicide, although the real cause of his death has yet to be released to the public.[\[9\]](#)

Healy was fond of secretly playing pranks at the Frogfeet offices in Stanford Research Park. He preferred mean pranks, ones that would embarrass the person being pranked. Using advanced government research engines, he'd find childhood photos of staff members. Using his photoshop expertise, he'd doctor up these photos, putting the children in sexual positions with other members of their families.[\[10\]](#) Needless to say, this didn't win him many friends.

Long story short: the cancer picture spam attack unleashed by RedPill and BluePill, and overseen by Healy, was essentially the Shock and Awe Campaign of the Internet Kill Switch Fiasco. It quickly metastasized into an uncontrollable hack that dismantled internet browsers. It also infested smartphones, taking all their information from GPS locations to credit card numbers. Healy had personally built a special hack in the smartphone virus that kept phones on locked modes. The sheer frustration of many Millennials caused a worldwide increase in suicide rates.[\[11\]](#)

By November 2029, the internet was no longer accessible, not in Safe mode or on at any wifi hotspot. If any internet browser was opened, the machine would reboot itself. It was a global endemic of epic proportions. Most people sat in front of their machines, assuming their internet service providers would fix the problem.[\[12\]](#) Internet corporations such as Amazon and Google lost billions by the day. Yahoo! folded its doors within the first three hours. Without computers manipulating stocks, the stock market crashed in a little under an hour, sending droves of hedge managers into hiding. It

seemed as if Healy and his henchmen had truly demolished the World Wide Web.

Only one hacker, a teen known as Tig-o-Bitties – TigBit for short – could take on Healy and his henchmen.

TigBit and the Chinese Firewall

TigBit grew up hacking. He wasn't like his peers, other teens on 4Chan who tried to hack into the Pentagon or take down the North Korean Government. TigBit was old school. He'd modified an Altair 8800,[\[13\]](#) miraculously upgrading the dinosaur to the point that it could run Windows 10. He'd painstakingly reconstructed Babbage's differential machine just for the hell of it and named it Ada. He built a mouse out of toilet paper, clock pieces and a restaurant menu. He'd even built his own microprocessor, albeit crude, that resembled Intel's 8080 processor from the seventies.

TigBit wasn't just a hardware guy. He was a coding wizard, mastering Basic and Cobol at the age of five. It took him hours to build what other coders built in weeks. TigBit worked in blasts of hacking which he called ragers. A rager could last anywhere from fifteen hours to thirty hours depending on his mood. [\[14\]](#) He was fueled solely by Kool Aid packets, which he liked to pour out on his hand and lick. If he felt a downswing in energy, he'd make a six shot espresso (with the espresso machine he'd built), pour it over a brownie, crack an egg on top and eat the concoction.

In a twist of fate no one could have seen coming, TigBit was the first person the President of the United States contacted when the internet was completely shut down. By this time, Healy was living on an island in international waters and RedPill and BluePill had gone into hiding. TigBit took the call from his basement. The following is a transcript of the call, taken from the President's memoir:[\[15\]](#)

President: Is this TigBit?

TigBit: Speaking.

President: I'm contacting you because of your skill with computers.

TigBit: I do have those. Yes.

President: As you know, the internet has been completely shut down for a few days now. I haven't gotten my Netflix yet...

TigBit: Sorry to hear that, sir. I probably should tell you that the internet isn't completely shut down, but even the above average hacker will have problems logging in. I repeat – Healy didn't shut it down. He simply made it impossible to log on.

President: You're getting too technical for me!

TigBit: I repeat. He didn't shut it down; he made it impossible to log on.

President: OK, that's enough technical jargon. I'm calling because our team of computer experts at the FBI suggested I contact you.

TigBit: How do they know about me?

President: I can brief you on this later. We need you to get to DC pronto!

TigBit: Airports have been shut down over the last few days because airlines don't know how to run their systems without using computers.

President: I'm aware of this. In exactly one hour, a helicopter will land in your cul-de-sac. I'd like you to get on this helicopter and come to DC. TigBit, the American people need you.

TigBit: You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.

President: What's that?

TigBit: If I help the American government, I want you to make an amendment to the Constitution that will keep the federal government's hands off the internet. I also want you to declare access to the internet a basic human right. Finally, I want to form a taskforce to hack the Chinese internet service providers, allowing all Chinese people free access to the internet.

President: The first two I can do. The final request... why... this

could be considered an act of war!

TigBit: China holds too much of our debt to go to war with us. A war with the US would simply crumble their economy. They may be angry, but they won't do anything. They're pussies.

President: Please, mind your language TigBit! How do you know all this anyway?

TigBit: Because my parents are Chinese immigrants and I see how easily they've adapted. Just because people have access to the internet, doesn't mean they'll be waving Free Tibet flags and downloading videos of that dude getting run over in Tiananmen Square. Paranoid is as paranoid does!

President: But how do you know this will work?

TigBit: Dammit, Mr. President, this isn't the time for redundant questioning!

President: And if their government simply shuts down the internet?

TigBit: Let's focus here!

President: But it was your idea...

TigBit: What was my idea?

President: Disrupting Chinese politics by allowing free access to the internet through the disruption of their firewall!

TigBit: Yes! That's what we'll do. The Great Firewall of China must come down! Bring down that wall, Mr. President!

President: Get ahold of yourself, man! China isn't the enemy here, Broderick Healy is! The internet is essentially shutdown!

TigBit: There are many enemies to the internet, including Comcast, China, Russia, the NSA, ATT&T and Time Warner, but that's not what is important. Stopping Healy is what is important. So, Mr. President, do we have a deal?

President: Fine. The helicopter is on its way.

The HCF Task Force

The narrative takes an interesting turn after TigBit created his Healy-China Firewall, or HCF, task force. The HCF Task Force relocated to Seattle, under the watchful eyes of Bill Gates, who was also interested in cracking Healy's global hack. [16]

Bill Gates was instrumental in the early technological development of the HCF Task Force. While the world thought he was somewhere in Sub-Sahara Africa curing disease (which he was), he was also developing some of the most powerful software ever known to man. On the first page of the book, *Gates and TigBit: Heroes of Code, Enemies of Healy: A Memoir*, one of the engineers on their team named Phuck Aducke (French-Vietnamese origin), explained what it was like to work with the two men, one a hacker, one a billionaire:

I don't know if I would call them geniuses.
Any man can be a genius if he dedicates his life
to his task. Most men are buffoons because they
spend the majority of their time thinking of
places to jab with their penises, that or sport
games which they have no direct control over.

Critics will argue that Gates and TigBit had different goals. Gates wanted to reopen the internet for business because much of Microsoft's projected revenues could only be reached through global internet access. TigBit wanted to stop Healy too, but he was also interested in bringing down China's control over their media. Gates only became interested in the Chinese firewall *after* TigBit calculated how much money he would make if Chinese people could access Microsoft products and information freely. 'I'll be able to cure every disease in the world!' Gates is quoted as saying. [17]

After their formation, the HCF Task Force set about locating RedPill and BluePill, the men partially responsible for the viral video hack spread by Healy. As soon as their locations were revealed, the US Government sent a task force to apprehend the two suspects.

BluePill's interrogation

RedPill and BluePill[18] were born and raised in the Punjab. Their parents were devout Sikhs who had never used the internet before. Their father owned a wheat farm somewhere on the outskirts of Amritsar. When questioned about his children's role in the global internet shut down, he said, 'Dismantling the internet is something that will benefit all of humanity. I've lived my entire life as a poor farmer. What has the internet ever done for me? Why should I care about the internet or those involved with it? Can the internet water my crops? No. Can the internet sell my wheat to a company in Delhi? No. Can the internet do anything aside from distracting young people? I don't know. I've never used the internet. If I had known my sons were so heavily involved with internet, I would have arranged marriages for them.'[19]

Through a joint-task force with the Indian Army (which hardly did anything aside from supply the American Marines unlimited trips to the chow hall and unlimited trips directly to a line of squat toilets following every meal), RedPill and BluePill were quickly apprehended. They were extradited to America under a new provision of the Patriot Act, which allowed America to apprehend subjects globally that they deemed a threat to their citizens (Remember: thousands of Americans had committed suicide due to the Internet blackout).

After an afternoon of waterboarding, rectal feeding, listening to Metallica nonstop and other forms of torture mastered under the Bush Administration, BluePill finally explained how they had shut down the internet. The following transcript was provided under duress:

BluePill: Stop sticking food in my ass! What the fuck is wrong with you people!?

Homeland Security Agent: How did you do it? How did you shut down the internet!

BluePill: I won't tell!

Homeland Security Agent: Again -----, [20] more food! More rectal feeding!

BluePill: No! It hurts! Please!

Homeland Security Agent: How did you do it? Tell us how you did it and I'll take the tube out of your ass.

BluePill: Fine! I'll tell (sobbing). I'll tell you anything you want. It was... it was my brother's idea!

Homeland Security Agent: You'll have to do better than that, BluePill. Feed him again! More food!

BluePill: No! OK! OK! I'll tell you how we did it. Please, leave my anus alone!

How They Did It

I suppose there could be a better title for this section, but the four words above will have to do for now. The point of this section is for you to understand the basics of what Healy and his henchmen did. For the techless at heart, I'll keep the language simple and I'll try and wrap it up in a few paragraphs.

Let's again focus on Broderick Healy, and the way he maneuvered his way to the top of the tech industry. It was through his constant questioning that Healy discovered what was essentially the Internet's kill switch. It all began with the Communications Act of 1934, which gave the President control over the media under times of crisis. Now if you remember correctly, or if your grandparents remember correctly, there was no internet in the 1930s. However, there were forms of the internet in the 1960s, which the American Government became heavily invested in. Weary of the impending digital age, a program was created under the Nixon Administration to investigate a kill switch for "future phone-line based communication methods." [21] Fast forward twenty years and the internet kill switch was born. In a rare case of government foresight, the director off the program, Derrick Koch Gobbler, decided to move the switch from

analog (a red button somewhere) to digital (a red button that could be anywhere).

The internet kill switch became as clickable as a “like” or “share” button.

Once Healy discovered this, he spent half his fortune trying to recreate a button that, when pressed, would permanently disable internet access.[\[22\]](#) He was at his wit’s end when he met RedPill and BluePill on 4Chan. The two brothers provided the missing ingredient in Healy’s plot and soon, his cancer images were being shared all around the world. Every time his images were shared or the link was clicked, a new kill switch button was propagated. At this point it became a virus on a person’s computer and before shutting down the internet, it infiltrated the person’s social networks starting with Facebook and Frogfeed, eventually infecting everyone associated with that person.[\[23\]](#)

The only thing the Kill Switch Virus couldn’t get past was the Chinese firewall.

The Reverse Engineering Heard ‘Round the World

Once Gates and TigBit understood what Healy had created, the HCF Task Force in Seattle had a meeting over burritos that has since become famous. The burritos, delivered by a drone delivery company called DroneRitos, are said to be what inspired Gates to stand on the table and shout: “We will reverse-engineer the crap out of the Kill Switch Button! Now give me my burrito, dammit!”[\[24\]](#)

The next day, TigBit went to work in what he called “The Cave.” The Cave was inspired by the cyberpunk book *Ready Player One*, in which one of the players drove around the country in an RV, resting to use a haptic suit to access a virtual reality world. TigBit, even though Gates had provided a lush estate for the HCF Task Force, preferred working in his RV. [\[25\]](#)

Fueled by music from an old RPG called *Chrono Trigger*, TigBit worked nonstop, coding and coding until Gates had to

physically pry him out of his trailer. What follows is the transcript of their conversation.

TigBit: What are you doing!? I'm almost finished!

Gates: You've been in here for five days without food or sleep! You must eat, TigBit!

TigBit: I've never felt more alive, Bill! All I need are energy drinks! I'm crashing fast!

Gates: Listen, TigBit, and listen to me well. I see something in you, I see... I see myself in you.

TigBit: I'm not a Microsoft lackey, Gates! I despise what you've done with software. I'm a Linux baby! A Linux baby!

Gates: It doesn't matter what you are, TigBit, you're my friend and you are a very, very good coder and hacker.

TigBit (sobbing): I'll never be as good as you, Bill! I'll never create a multi-billion dollar company.

Gates: There, there, that's what I like to hear. Just as long as we're clear. So, what have you discovered? Just tell me and I'll get the team working on it while you rest.

TigBit: Really? You'd do that for me?

Gates: I'll do anything for you, TigBit.

TigBit told Gates what he uncovered. That night as TigBit slept, Gates used the information to recreate the Kill Switch Virus in the form of a benevolent virus he called, the Microsoft Kill Switch Killer. The MKSK was tested, approved and distributed to the masses via air drops. Once people installed the virus, it counteracted Healy's virus. It also spread through social networks, dis-infecting (by infecting) other people's computers. By the time TigBit woke up from a two day nap, the MKSK had obliterated the Kill Switch Virus.

Within the week, Broderick Healy was apprehended by the Feds on his private island. Using war dolphins, [\[26\]](#) the US military was able to infiltrate Healy's private estate. Once the dolphins

approached the shores, they began firing water-to-surface missiles at Healy's mansion, which was made to resemble the Death Star (round, gray, big). No one knows what happened to Healy, but it is believed that he was killed by one of these torpedoes. [27]

The Great Internet Reset of 2030 began as soon as the Kill Switch Virus was eliminated. RedPill and BluePill were transferred to ADX Florence, a high security federal prison in Colorado and TigBit sued Gates for stealing his code. Of course, a hacker hardly has the legal resources of a multi-billion dollar company like Microsoft, and it took all of three months for Microsoft's lawyers to dismantle TigBit's case.

As 2030 progressed, the Chinese kept their firewall, the United States Congress returned to their debates on restricting internet freedoms, Homeland Security continued enhancing their advanced interrogation tactics, and TigBit was offered a job at Microsoft's rival, Apple, as a chief coder. As of this writing, Gates has gone back to Africa to wage jihad against a new strand of Ebola. The war dolphins that allegedly killed Broderick Healy have been returned to the marina in New York Harbor and the world continues to wait patiently for the next crisis to present itself.

From My Cold Dead Hands

“You were right,” George is saying. “Damn if you weren’t right.”

“Told you that much,” Sheldon says. “Ain’t that hard to see. Obozo gets another four years and by that time... well, you know how I feel about it.”

They’re standing outside a bar in Smithville, a small Texas town where *Hope Floats* was filmed. George takes a long drag off his cigarette. “I know it. I was at Wally World the other day looking for some 9mm rounds. Of course they ain’t got none. Nothing there but an empty shelf.”

“With dust on it,” Sheldon adds, ashing his cigarette. Marlboro Red, unfiltered.

“Yeap, with dust on it. So I’m pissed.”

“As you should be.” Sheldon hocks a loogie onto the weather-beaten curb. George sniffs real loud and wipes his nose on his red button-up. The top three buttons are undone and his curly chest hair is twisting out.

“And so I’m walking back to my truck, and guess who it is...”

“Bill Boyer?”

“Yeap,” George says. “And he’s just sitting in his truck and looking at me with a grin on his face.”

“And he’s got bullets, don’t he?”

“You betcha, and he says to me, ‘George, you in the market?’ and I’m in the market so I say to him, ‘Bill cut the bull. What you got up in there?’”

“He’s got 9mm’s, don’t he?”

“Yeap.”

“And how much did he want for them?” Sheldon asks.

Sheldon has known George all his life. Too long, if you ask Sheldon. Not long enough, if you ask George. They grew up in Smithville together. Sheldon married and lived in Elgin for a while, but after he got divorced, it was back to his roots.

George’s never been married, and that hot Texas sun and the nightly fifth of whiskey has taken its toll on his grizzled old face. Gnarled now. Gnarled at forty-seven years old like someone beat him with a pair of cheese graters. Only thing beautiful about the man is his piercing eyes, little blue things attached to crow’s feet under a wrinkled crown.

“He charged me fifty bucks for a hundred rounds,” George mumbles. Covering his bald dome is a maroon baseball cap that says A&M. It casts a sad shadow over his eyes and nose.

Just the thought of Bill Boyer taking advantage of his friend boils Sheldon’s blood. He tosses his cigarette to the ground and watches it fizzle against a yellow patch of grass. He wants it to start a fire, dares it. *Bring it on*, he thinks to Bill, to his government, to the world.

“Boys.”

It’s Wyatt Thompson, the oldest of the three. He’s somewhat of an inspiration to Sheldon. The man survives an angioplasty, a quadruple bypass, gets put on a pace maker, and still got the eye of a hawk. Plus, he can pound beers with the best of them.

Wyatt hands George and Sheldon a pair of Styrofoam cups. “LouAnne said it’d be alright to drink out here, so drink up. This round’s on me.”

“Appreciate that,” George says.

“So, what’s all this talk I hear about fifty bucks for a hundred rounds of 9mm’s? Who’s charging that?” Wyatt asks. He adjusts his belt, which barely seems to keep his girth from spilling over.

“Bill Boyer. No other place to get ammo around here. I could go to

Austin, but you know it'll be gone there too," George says.

"I can't believe they haven't outlawed ammunition sales in old Austin yet. Damn hippies and vampire cops running that town. I can't even stand driving through that liberal shithole." Sheldon takes a sip from his beer and wipes the foam off his mustache.

"I feel you there," Wyatt says on the tail end of a burp. "But, George, I got to ask you, did you actually buy them rounds from Bill?"

"I bought two hundred."

"Well, then the only idiot here is you," Wyatt says. "It's a dammed *artificial* shortage. There ain't a real shortage of ammo. It's people like Bill buying up the rounds and then hawking them to people like you. If you buy them, you drive up the price. Simple as that. Obama's probably the best thing that's happened to bullet manufacturers since the start of the Iraq War."

George says, "Well, when he outlaws bullets, we'll see who's laughing then, Wyatt."

"I got plenty. I bought a dozen mags and four tins of 5.45s about six months ago. I'll be fine. Ain't worried one bit." Wyatt licks the front of his teeth like there's a piece of jerky stuck in there.

"This is just the start, you know," George says. "Clinton's the one that started that waiting period. Soon they'll be doing background checks, then they'll just ban them outright. That's their goal. Ain't that right, Sheldon?"

Sheldon nods. "Right. It ain't hard to see what they're doing. It really ain't that hard, Wyatt. Nazis did the same damn thing, and look what happened there. All that hoopla could've been stopped if someone had just put a bullet in the back of Hitler's head. We're just going about the whole banning process a little slower than the Nazis. That's all."

"You boys are too paranoid," Wyatt says. "Now, both of you know I'd give Obama the finger just as quickly as any other guy, but he ain't going to be in power long enough to take our guns or our bullets."

Dems keep trying, but America ain't that stupid. Y'all need to quit worrying about that shit."

"You say that, until they come for you," Sheldon mumbles, lighting another cigarette.

"Yeap," George agrees. He's got that glazed look in his eyes that he gets every day at about four o'clock when the first drink settles in his belly.

"Point is," Sheldon says, "I saw this shit coming long before Obozo was re-elected. I bought ten cases of Golden Tigers – ten thousand rounds, mind you. That should hold them off."

"Ten thousand rounds!" Wyatt laughs.

"You laugh now," Sheldon growls. He's angry, but not angry enough to say something to Wyatt. Too much respect for the man. He gives his Styrofoam cup to George. "Finish her for me, will ya? I got things to do."

"You take care now," Wyatt says.

If you can't dazzle them with brilliance, riddle them with bullets.

Sheldon didn't write that quote, doesn't write much. Don't matter anyhow. It's a good signature for his profile on Targetpractice's online message board, where he goes by the name AmmoNut. He's a star member now, and he's made over two thousand posts since Chairman Obama was elected. He's proud of that. He knows they're coming for him; it's just a matter of time.

His signature used to be, *Happiness is a road lined with crosses and Jihadists nailed to them*. He used this signature for maybe six months. Before that it was a quote from Gandhi. He liked that quote from Gandhi – it gave the socialists a run for their money. He imagined them looking at the message board and being abhorred. Take a guy who does all this shit for India in the name of peace. Take his own

quote and spin it on them: *I do believe that where there is a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence.*

Sheldon's driving his truck down 79 towards his home. He takes a left after Clair's, drives down a paved road for a bit, and turns onto a dirt road full of rocks and dry red earth. He thinks about Bill Boyer, has known him since high school. Big linebacker back then, married young, had a couple of kids (one's in jail near Bergstrom for making meth), and eventually became a widower after his wife died from a malignant tumor. Was always a real asshole too: fucked anything that would spread eagle for him, ripped people off, fought anyone that looked at him funny. Now he's scalping 9mm ammo. Doesn't surprise Sheldon one bit.

It's been a long time since Sheldon thought about a 9mm. Not since he got his baby. Named her Elvira. She was in in her plastic case, just sitting in the little space behind his seat and the back window of his truck with its NRA sticker. He loved to oil her up, stroke her shaft, feel her rumbling against his shoulder as he squeezed her trigger; loved to listen to her spit fire from her barrel like an angry cobra; loved to see other people's reactions when he displayed her. You'd be surprised how many people have never seen an AK-47 in real life. It ain't a thing of the movies – not in Sheldon's America.

He shoots her three or four times a week, and since he lives in an old house he built himself on the edge of a big patch of oaks, he can fire her freely into his backyard. If he's lucky, he'll catch a critter rummaging around his property. Once, he got an armadillo in the ass and it jumped so high Michael Jordan would've been proud. A few weeks ago he caught a pair of rabbits humping. Killed them both with a single spray.

Now parked in his driveway with the door open, Sheldon can smell the rain coming. Smithville is about three hours away from the Gulf of Mexico and the place is humid as Hell Almighty. He's got some wildflowers lining his driveway. Some Indian paintbrushes, a couple of dying blue bonnets and little white flowers that look like buttercups but aren't quite buttercups. He didn't plan for the red, white, and blue

motif and if things keep going the way they're going, well those colors just might change.

A new anthill has sprung up in the shade of a mangled yaupon hedge he keeps trying to grow. Tree ants. You can tell where they live by following the line of leaves that lead to their pile. Little bastards can strip a tree in a single day, but they're too stupid to hide the evidence. He'll deal with them after he brings Elvira in the house. Can't have his rifle sitting in the truck for too long.

The first place Sheldon heads to when he gets inside is his bathroom. The two beers he drank are racing through him. He usually just pisses outside, but he gets the urged to be civilized for once. He jiggles the toilet handle until it flushes, cleans the piss he got on the toilet seat with a piece of toilet paper and walks back into the living room.

The blinking red button on his answering machine calls out to him. He presses it: *Hey Sheldon, Bill Boyer here. I thought you might be in the need for bullets 'cause of the shortage and all. Well, I was lucky enough to pick up some just before the run on ammo. Listen, if you need something, you let me know. I'll give you a fair price now, ain't no sense in taking advantage of an old friend. Anyhow, give me a holler.*

"Fair price my ass." Sheldon peels off his shirt, stripping down to his wife-beater-stained-yellow from a year's worth of beer sweat. He ought to call Bill back and say something. Ought to give him a piece of his mind. Been a long time coming. He flicks the little knob on the bottom of the air conditioner to the right. It clicks on and cold air starts to billow out of the vent above his television.

Tree ants. He needs to get those bastards before they strip another tree. Every year he battles bugs and critters and every year they get closer to winning than they did the year before. Nature is making a comeback; she's angry about something but Sheldon doesn't know what. Can't be global warming; only a liberal would say something stupid like that. Could be God. Probably is God. God's had enough of this cruel place and is ready to clean his palate. He won't be sending Noah this time, that's something Sheldon is sure of.

His shirt goes back on and he steps outside. The Texas air is heavy. It's strange when you step from the a/c into the despotic humidity. He takes a moment, clutches his heart – that mysterious beating bastard that seems to keep ticking no matter how bad the place gets – and watches as George pulls up into his driveway.

“Had enough of Wyatt?” Sheldon calls out to him.

“Nope, just thought I’d stop by and see how you’re doing,” George says. He slams the door of his truck and it pops open again. “Damn thing,” he says, putting his weight into it. “So, what’s up?”

“I’m fixing to take out an anthill.”

“Tree ants?”

“Yup, they’re back again. Just in time for spring to finish too.”

“Well, how were you planning on doing it?”

“I’m thinking about smoking them out.”

“Oh yeah?” George says. A wicked grin spreads across his face. “You got some gasoline?”

“Sure do, in the garage.”

“You’d better move your truck.”

Sheldon backs his truck out of the gravel driveway and parks it along the main dirt road next to George’s. Meanwhile, George is in his garage, unwinding a thick string Sheldon usually uses to tie off deer sausage. He meets Sheldon in front of the pile with the gas can and the makeshift wick. Both men are drenched in sweat by this point.

“Look at how big that pile is,” Sheldon says.

“Yeap,” George says. He wipes his nose on his red button-up and hocks a loogie.

“It must be a foot high.”

“Foot and a half.”

“Well, you know what to do,” Sheldon says. “We got to do it quick though, otherwise the little bastards will scatter.”

George plunges the nozzle into the anthill and begins filling it with gas. That sweet stench of gas tingles Sheldon's nostrils as he unwinds the white string and readies it.

"How much?" George asks, looking up at him.

"That'll do."

George yanks the nozzle out. Like skydivers, ants attached to the nozzle plummet to the ground below. George twists the cap on and takes the gas canister back to Sheldon's garage.

"All right." Sheldon shoves the thick string in the hole and steps back. He runs out of string about fifteen feet away. George joins him and lights a cigarette. From the distance, Sheldon can see the gas fumes like a mirage sitting in the air above the anthill.

"You want to do the honors?" he asks.

"You go ahead." George says.

Sheldon lights the end of the string and stands. He puts his fingers in his ears, watching as the string slowly starts to turn black. The blackness crawls until it reaches the anthill.

"Here she goes!" George turns his head away from the impending explosion.

Ka-BOOOOOM!

Dirt sprays into the air. A big cloud of dust fills the space above the anthill and the falling debris pelts the parched soil. Ants are toasted crispy and Sheldon is smiling big. Nice to see that type of destruction from time to time.

"Damn," George says.

"All in a day's work. You want a beer?" Sheldon asks.

"Yeap."

They enter through the backdoor into Sheldon's kitchen. Sheldon takes two Lonestar tall boys from his fridge and hands one to George.

"So, I got a message." He goes over to his answering machine and presses play. The little red light blinks as Bill Boyer's voice begins. The message finishes and George takes a long hard sip from his beer. An empty stare creeps across his chiseled face.

"Well?" Sheldon asks. He can feel the sweat pooling under his arms, and thinks about turning the a/c down even lower. *Damn the heat.*

"Frankly, I'm wondering if he'd charge you more than he charged me." George takes his pack of cigarettes from the pocket on the front of his shirt. "You mind?"

"Not as long as you give me one. So you think he'd charge me less?"

George lights his cigarette and looks down at the red embers. "He knows we're friends, he knows you'd tell me."

"But he might have spiked up the prices, especially if you looked desperate in that parking lot."

"Hell no I didn't look desperate."

"Only one way to find out. Should I call him and see about them prices?" Sheldon asks as he lights his cigarette. He's got a feeling he can get a better price. Bill always treated George like a bitch, ever since high school.

"Call him up."

Sheldon picks up the phone and dials Bill's number. It rings twice and Bill picks up.

"Hey Bill, how you doing? Me? Fine as always. Just taking care of the property. Always a battle out here with the critters and whatnot. But you know that. George?"

Sheldon looks at George. "Nope, haven't seen him. He's been MIA recently. I think he may be back to truck driving. Who

knows? Anyways, I'm calling about that 9mm ammo. I just picked up a Ruger a few weeks back. Yup, it's the LC9. Yup, it's a little bigger than the .380. So, how much you selling ammo for? Thirty five for a hundred rounds?"

George slams his fist against the table. Sheldon holds his hand out. "Well, I'll be over a little later then to pick up three hundred rounds. Yup, see you when I see you."

Sheldon hangs up the phone, satisfied he's proved his point. "You paid fifty, right?"

"Yeap." George glares down at his beer. "That sonuvabitch!"

Sheldon sits down and ashes his cigarette. "I'll tell you what I think we should do. I think we should go on over there together and demand a refund. Why's he all the sudden lowering his prices? What's he trying to pull? I say we go over there, and if things get ugly, well, then they get ugly."

"You think things will get ugly?" George asks.

"Not if Elvira has anything to say about it. Let's eat first though."

Sheldon cooks up a can of baked beans with chunks of sausage and diced onions thrown in for good measure. He lets the beans simmer in the skillet until they are black on one end. He sautés the sausage with the onions in a separate skillet, adding a little garlic powder and a sprinkle of taco seasoning.

"Smelling real good." George is sitting at the table looking at a *Guns & Ammo* magazine. He's halfway through his second tall boy when the food comes. "Can't never go wrong with beans," he says.

"That's for goddamn sure."

“Say Sheldon, I’ve been meaning to ask you, what’s your take on this whole whistleblower NSA thing?” George asks with a mouthful of beans. “You think the government is really monitoring us? They was talking about it on the radio while I was on my way over here.”

“Us? Like you and me?” Sheldon thinks for a moment. He stabs a piece of sausage with his fork and looks it over. “Nah, they ain’t monitoring us per say. I mean, about the only thing I do on the internet is check my e-mail and look at new guns coming out.”

“What about that message board?”

“Targetpractice.com?”

“Yeap.”

“Well, I do that too.”

“So you ain’t nervous about this then?”

“Nope, ain’t nervous one bit and I will tell you why: I already saw this coming. The government has grown too big for its own britches and like anyone that gots too much power, they want to keep it. Maintain it. So they’re going to spy on people in the name of liberty. That’s why I’ve been stocking up, you know that. And when the time comes, I’ll be ready.”

“Yeap, when the time comes.”

“You’ll be ready too, George, and so will Wyatt and a bunch of other folks around here. Hell, Bill too. We might seem like a bunch of hicks – or whatever the rest of the world thinks of a real Texan – but we got our guns and our guns are going to make it harder for them to get us. That’s for goddamn sure.”

“What would you do if they came? You know, if they showed up here or something?”

“Let me ask you something, George. Did you ever look at the ways I built them windows in the living room?” Sheldon wipes excess beans away from his mustache with a napkin. He uses his tongue to lick the rest off.

“Nope, never looked.”

“Bullet proof glass. That’s why they look so funny. You ever noticed how thick they are? Hell, all the walls in this house are thicker than your normal wall.”

“Never noticed.”

“Also, my deer blinds.”

“You got one of them up in them trees, along the driveway,” George says. He’s a fast eater, and is almost done with his plate.

“Sure do. I also got a new one in back you haven’t seen before. The trees are thick enough out here. It’s a damn good place for a last resort.”

“So those are for some sort of government invasion?”

“No, they’re to hunt deer. However, if someone comes for me, you’ll know where to find me. Announce yourself before coming though,” Sheldon warns.

“What else you got?”

“You know when I replaced the septic tank a few years back when my granddaddy died?”

“Yeap.”

“I installed a bunker in the same spot where the old septic tank used to be. Been stocking her up ever since. I got ninety gallons of fresh water down there, couple of crank generators, a bunch of MREs, canned goods, iodine tablets – a whole slew of things. Maybe I’ll show you sometime.” He lowers his eyes down to his plate. It feels good to get the extent of his preparations off his chest.

“You never told me about all that.” George finishes his beer and squeezes the can.

“And you’d better not tell anyone else.”

“Secret’s safe with me. You know that.”

“Also,” Sheldon leans in closer, “I might or might not have picked up some C4 from the fella in Houston last year.”

“C4?” George asks. If he’s alarmed by Sheldon’s confession, his face doesn’t show it.

“Now that there is a last case scenario, but if they do come – there is going to be hell to pay. You know what though, enough of this talk for now, we need to figure out tonight. What’s our angle?” Sheldon asks.

“I say we just go up there together. Just walk right up to his front porch. Imagine the look on his face when he sees we are together. ‘Bill,’ I’ll tell him, ‘I figured I’d come along with Sheldon here to see about acquiring some ammunition.’ He’ll know right then and there that the game’s over.”

“I like it.” Sheldon scoops another spoonful of beans and onions and sausage into his mouth. He chews for a minute, swallows, and takes a gulp from his beer. That almost delicious almost nauseating taste of onion lingers on his molars. “I say I go up there first. I’ll park in that spot near his driveway where you can’t see from his porch.”

“Yeap, he did build that house at a strange angle.”

“Sure did. Anyhow, I’ll go greet him all cordial-like, pull Elvira out. We’ll go into his backyard and I’ll fire off a few rounds into the woods. You hear the first shot, and you come around back, just when he’s getting comfortable, and we’ll see about getting you a refund.”

“Sounds good,” George says, cracking open another beer.

They finish dinner, slam the last of the beers, and load into Sheldon’s truck. He packs Elvira in the back and both men smoke

a cigarette as they cross over the highway, onto Cottletown Road. They begin the climb up the hill, past the Luther's house, and a new home that's bigger than both their homes combined. Clouds overhead have grown dark as coal and Sheldon guesses they have about an hour before it starts raining.

He hangs a left onto a dirt road, and falls into the tire grooves carved into the soil God knows how long ago. The road gets bumpy, and pebbles plink against the hot metal exterior of his truck. A grasshopper jumps onto his window and he uses the windshield wiper to flick it off.

He feels good, real good about what's going to happen. He's sick of people taking advantage of his friends, of finer folks. Crying shame what's happening to the country and to think who's running the place only makes it worse. Add people trying to take advantage of others by selling them marked up ammunition prices and you got a recipe for disaster. Damn if it hasn't come to this.

Sheldon jutters up Bill's driveway. He parks in the blind spot under the old oak tree and tells George to wait. "If you don't hear bullets, come around back in about fifteen minutes," he says.

Sheldon figures it shouldn't take long to convince Bill he should show him his new AK.

"There he is!" Bill says. He burps and that sweetsick smell of liquor floats out the door. Drunker than two skunks. "Put her there buddy," he says, shaking Sheldon's hand. "Boy, I thought you was never coming. You getting a perm or something?"

"Just cooking some dinner. I told you I'd come later."

"Like hell you did. You didn't say shit about coming later," Bill's face is covered in white and black whiskers. His skin is yellow, and his nose is red and bulbous. Sheldon can't remember if his nose always looked like that. "Say, what you got in that there case? Looks big."

“Newest addition to my collection. Goes by the name Elvira. You might know her as AK-47.”

“You done got yourself a big boy gun there. Damn! Why are you buying 9mm ammo when you got that? Come on in!”

“I’ll tell you later,” Sheldon says, entering Bill’s house.

Bill’s house is no larger than Wyatt’s trailer a couple miles down the road. Just a shack really. The kitchen and the living room are awkwardly connected like a stitch on Frankenstein’s skull. Bill’s got this shit-eating grin on his face to mask the tragedy that is his life. Sheldon notes it, but business is business.

“You want a drink?” Bill asks. “I just picked up a six pack of Tecate from Claire’s. Hell, who am I kidding? You’re a guest. How ‘bout a shot of tequila followed by a fresh Tecate.”

“Been a while since I drank tequila. I think I’ll just stick with the Tecate.”

Bill’s face puckers inward. “I’m *offering* you a shot of tequila, Sheldon. Feeling just a little disrespected here. This is *my* house and damn if we don’t get ourselves good and liquored up on some of Mexico’s finest.”

“No disrespect.” Sheldon opens Elvira’s case. “Sure, Bill, give me a shot. Speaking of shots, you interested in doing some shooting outside? I figured we could unload a quick round before the storm rolls in.”

“Now you’re talking! You didn’t bring your Ruger did you?”

“Nope, I figured I’d just pick up some ammo from you today.”

“Fair enough,” Bill pours two shots of tequila from a half empty bottle of Jose Cuervo. “Oh, I forgot to tell you, I picked up a Beretta Nano from Cabalas last month. I’ve got to show you this little bastard. Small enough to fit in your drawers but boy does she pack a punch. Kickback reminds me of Wyatt’s Colt 45.”

“A little Beretta firing like a Colt 45? You’re shitting me,” Sheldon says, taking the shot glass from Bill.

“I ain’t lying to you.” Bill slices through a lime with his pocket knife. “Hell, I’ll show you in just a minute here.”

“All right, then.’ Sheldon picks up a slice of lime from Bill’s cutting board and throws back the shot, wincing at the tequila burn. He sticks the lime in his mouth and sucks it for all its worth.

Bill starts talking about a story he heard from Wyatt about some guy in Austin inventing the first 3D gun. Sounds real stupid to Sheldon: he’ll take a *real* gun over a plastic gun any day. Then Bill’s going on and on about some kid in West Virginia who got suspended for wearing a pro-NRA shirt with the phrase *Protect Your Right* across the chest. Idiot school board.

Sheldon turns his attention back to Elvira. He attaches the gas tube, opens the fly and locks it into place. Next is the bolt carrier. He slides the bolt into the black groove of the bolt carrier and twists the bolt into its proper notch. He sticks the bolt carrier into the gas tube, makes sure it’s flush, clicks it into place, and glides it towards the barrel. He watches Bill bump into his couch, nearly dropping his brand new gun. He always was a sloppy drunk.

Bill sets a box of ammo onto the kitchen table. “Damn you almost ready?” he asks. “I didn’t expect you to have to assemble her.” He pours another shot of tequila for himself and downs it. He sighs audibly, happy to be good and liquored.

“I cleaned her yesterday, so I got to do some reassembly. It’ll only take a minute,” Sheldon says. He clips the spring into its proper channel on the charging handle. *Check cleared.* He loves that sound. He puts the dust cover over the spring and secures it down into the charging handle with two smacks from his fist. By the time Sheldon double checks everything and puts the magazine in, Bill is already outside firing into the woods.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

“Damn,” Sheldon says, stuffing his earplugs in. He grabs Elvira and opens the back door just in time to hear Bill yelling, “Wooooo!”

Bill’s wasted, trying to shoot with one hand instead of two. He was

always a dumbass like that, always trying to show off even if it wasn't necessary. From high school into his late forties: some people never learn. He's shooting at an old box in front of an ugly shrub sixty feet away. He's got this look on this face that could only be described as drunken abandon.

"Careful now, Bill," Sheldon says.

"Oh, ain't nobody out there." He fires off two more shots. The bullets hit the box; he always had decent aim.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Bill is still firing when George comes from around the other side of the house.

First thing Sheldon sees is George's red shirt, then his blue eyes, then his A&M ballcap. He's got that George look on his face, kind of stupid but stupid with a mix of wisdom, stupid wise maybe. Sheldon nods at him. Bill pauses for a moment, mesmerized by the power he holds in his hand and completely unaware that George is coming from around the corner. He steadies his aim on the box. "Fellas!" George calls out in that split second and Bill's reaction is instant. He turns to George and fires two shots directly into his chest.

Pop! Pop!

George's body flies backwards followed by a thin stream of blood. Bill yanks the gun down. "Shit!" he yells. "Ah shit!" George is on his back with his legs twitching. Bill's dropped his gun onto the table and is running over to George.

Sheldon clicks the safety off. He presses the butt of his AK-47 against his shoulder and aims at the back of Bill's head as Bill runs towards the fallen George. At the squeeze of the trigger, percussive rounds discharge from Elvira's cold black throat. The bullets pierce Bill's body before Sheldon's finger has even let go of the trigger. The bullets hit the back of his head and the flesh opens like rose petals. Bill falls forward just feet away from George.

It happened that fast. Sheldon's fingers are trembling and

there are two fresh bodies lying on the bricked path in front of him. George is coughing blood, reaching his hand in the air. Bill is lying on his stomach, blood bubbling from the wounds on his back of his head.

A numbness spreads up Sheldon's arms. He feels vomit rise in his stomach and swallows it back down. He clicks the safety on and sets Elvira down on the table next to Bill's Beretta. He can barely open Bill's back door his hands are so shaky. He finally manages to twist the handle open and walk inside. He sees the tequila bottle and takes a big pull off of it, damn near finishing it. He tosses the tequila bottle to the floor. Glass scatters. He curses until his voice is hoarse. He sees Elvira's case and carries it outside.

Bill has stopped moving, but George is still convulsing. Always was a tough sonuvabitch. Sheldon will remember that about him, but now isn't the time for sentiment. Truth be told, he's never shot a human before. He has, however, shot a zoo's worth of animals and knows they die the same way we do; knows that sometimes you got to put them out of their misery. And he doesn't want to do it, but he owes it to George. He knows he'd do the same for him.

Sheldon picks up the Beretta and steps over Bill's lifeless body. Elvira's done enough talking for the time being. He stops just before reaching his old friend. George is staring up at the sky, trying to raise his hands into the air. Blood is dripping off his fingertips and lightning is crackling in the sky above. The drifting heat is as oppressive as it's ever been.

"George," Sheldon says, trying his best not to choke up. He feels the tears stinging, but he wipes them away for now. There will be time to cry later. "Can you hear me buddy?"

George coughs up a small puddle of dark blood onto his chin and neck. No sound aside from the sucking sound of shallow breaths. He tries to curve his head forward to look at Sheldon but he can't. Small droplets of rain start to fall from the unnatural darkness that has settled over Bill's property.

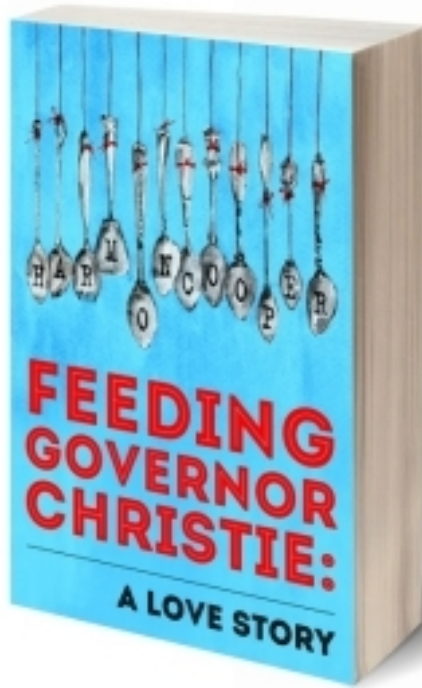
"Buddy, I'm going to finish it. I'm sorry for this," Sheldon

says, almost sobs, but stops himself. He can't look at George anymore. Instead he looks at the spot where his shirt is tucked over his belly and into his jeans. *He's just an animal.* He looks at the two bullet holes and the crimson stain. He looks up briefly at his friend's neck and face and raises the gun with his eyes closed.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Sheldon can barely breathe now. His stomach is pulsating and his hands are shaking so hard that he nearly drops the hand gun. He turns back towards the plastic table where Elvira is waiting for him. He sets Bill's gun down on the table and picks up Elvira.

They'd be coming for him soon and he needed to prepare.



[The sequel to Dear NSA is out now. Get it on Amazon here!](#)

In "Go Home Student Loans, You're Drunk," the author shares an e-mail he recently received from Nelnet services, the holder of 1/3 of America's student loan debt. Gun violence is again the topic in "Pay to Play" a story about a corporation that matches older citizens with police departments so they can perform the role of volunteer law enforcement officer. "Rest Assured: I Didn't Sleep with Your Mother" is a letter to a man's ex-girlfriend assuring her of his new position in life.

"Feeding Governor Christie: A Love Story," is a surreal piece about a couple arguing over an Instagram 'like' while stuffing the Governor of New Jersey and his distinguished guests. Madness ensues once a waitress is swallowed by the governor. "The Gastronomics of Brotherhood" continues along the intestinal tract, as a woman named

Clara receives e-mails from both of her brothers, who have been fighting it out for years over things that range from the benefits of enemas to philanthropy.

[Get it here.](#)

Dearest Reader,

If you have a moment, please leave [Dear NSA](#) an honest review on Amazon. Reviews are essential for independent authors such as myself to reach a wider audience. If you liked what you read, or you thought it could be better, please let me know. Don't forget to [sign up for my reader's group to get two free books](#). As always, you can contact me at writer.harmoncooper@gmail.com

Thanks for the support and enjoy the preview of Life is a Beautiful Thing on the following pages.

Harmon Cooper

www.harmoncooper.com



Reviews for Book One:

'Read it, then read book two!!' - *Amazon reviewer*

'Mesmerizing, dark dystopian thriller. The action never lets up.' - *Amazon top 500 reviewer*

'If Palahniuk wrote Trainspotting as a dystopian futuristic sci-fi, it would be this book...smart, funny, stylish, quick-moving, and cyberpunk-sexy.' - *Amazon top 500 reviewer*

'Strangely thrilling; imaginative and depressingly fresh, Cooper introduces a freakishly diverse cast of characters in a futuristic setting that is, sadly, a feasible reality in which to devolve.' - *Liquid Frost, Amazon Top 100 reviewer*

'This book will make you want to read the entire series.' - *Amazon reviewer*

'Crazy, funky, mind-boggling view of a whacked out future.' - *Amazon reviewer*

'Imaginative and fast paced.' - *Amazon reviewer*

'Love it or hate it – this is stunning!' –*Amazon UK customer*

'Definitely cyberpunk (William Gibson meets Phillip K Dick) with a side order of Clockwork Orange sums it up.' - *Goodreads reviewer*

'Serious page turner.' -*Amazon reviewer*

(sample) Life is a Beautiful Thing

BOOK ONE

Harmon Cooper

This book hops right into the fray with Meme, a Humandroid (read: android) therapist who is at a bar in LA using what are known as pollutes. He's just met Nelly, a pregnant woman who will have a huge impact on his life as the series progresses. He is on the verge of meeting Sauria, a powerful businessman and CEO of a company called Executive Executions who will later call for his death. Meme is also about to encounter Yeshi, a Humandroid escort who, like Nelly, will greatly impact his life.

Whew.

I tell you this for the sake of clarity. I read loads of novels, and it is always helpful to get a grip on things *before* diving headfirst into a series, especially one that is as strange as Life is a Beautiful Thing.

Book Three is out July 15th 2015.

Book Four will be out in August 2015, and will complete the Red Books, named because of their covers.

The madness begins on the next page. Enjoy and strap yourself in.

--Harmon Cooper

Currently, I'm getting wasted off pollutes with a pregnant woman three days before Halloween at POLLUTION CLUB 512 in Los Angeles. Nelly is a tall chick with a silver glaze on her belly caused by a recent application of C-Baby. She's in a cheesecloth shirt, topless underneath. Conservative compared to most at the club tonight.

As I speak to her, Nelly closes her eyes and logs into iNet. I really don't care if she's paying attention to me or not. I'll have her soon enough. I reach for a pollution mask, strap it onto my face, inhale, exhale, repeat. Life is a beautiful thing.

'So, do you want to switch bodies or not?' I ask her. I push the pollution mask to the top of my forehead. No sense in wasting time when time wastes you. The bulge of her pregnant stomach touches something primal inside me, reminds me of my own time in the womb, a glorious nine months. Rattle *dasein*!

'I'm talking to my friend Carloza about it,' Nelly says with her eyes closed. 'It's complicated when you're pregnant.'

'So you'll think about it then?' I ask. 'Let me get the next round.'

'Ok, just a little though.'

I set my pollution mask on a hook in front of the bar. The mask resembles a plague doctor's mask with emerald polypropylene eye lenses. It has a long beak-like nose to allow excess pollution to linger. The nose is connected to a series of distributor cables tucked under the bar. The designer ones are made from real leather and on some occasions, endangered animal skulls and other fine materials.

I glance back at Nelly. She reaches for her mask and pulls it down over her forehead. She's calm and collected, ready to inebriate. There's something different about her gait, as if she isn't used to coming to this pollution club or perhaps, not used to the commotion on the ground floor level. Intriguing to say the least, fascinating to say the most.

'I'll have one Naked Lunch and one Loathing Hunter,' I tell the bartender. He pulls out one of his dreadlocks and starts cleaning the inside of a shot glass with it. He positions the dreadlock above the first shot glass. An antifreeze-colored liquid trickles out of the end of his dreadlock. Nothing like getting high off fresh pollutes.

'You want an Ayahuasca topper?' He looks at me through a pair of old leaks.

'Sure.' I nod towards Nelly's stomach. 'It'll do the baby good.'

The bartender pours the drinks into a grimy tube connected to a series of pipes attached to the bar. I hear a hissing sound as the drinks are instantly vaporized into a fresh pollute. I point to the tube connected to Nelly's pollution mask. She nods and pulls her mask over her face.

We inhale to exhale.

Let's get this out of the way.

You're a tall person, or maybe you're short. Perhaps you're between tall and short. You're a fat person, who is skinny at heart, or a skinny person, who wants to be larger as to appear more intimidating. You're a mixture of tall and fat, fat and short, skinny and tall, or simply medium sized. Nothing wrong with being medium-sized. You are almost above average and we're both mediocre.

You're my grandmother on the verge of her seventy-sixth birthday, 532 in dog years. You're my ex-girlfriend, who is mad at me for breaking up with her over iNet. You're Columbian. You're a mix between Irish and Brazilian. You're a protomartyr with a penchant for self-righteousness. You're white and your grip on the world has finally started to subside. You're Asian. You're a librarian and you have a small pen in the shape of a Kalashnikov. Your mother is from Malaysia. Your father is from Niger and he rode velocipedes as a child. You were born in Melbourne and are a closet kangatarian who is into auto asphyxiation.

You're unique, you're angry, you're patriotic, you have an addiction, you don't give a shit about politics, you love your country, you're racist, you're funny, you're a thief, you're good in bed, you're a war veteran, you believe in magic, you aren't sincere, you think too much, you say too little, you're pathetic, you love your television, you hate your country, you routinely French kiss your spouse, you're a sex offender, you loathe your brother, you dance while no one's watching, you listen when no one's speaking, you're going to die tomorrow (goodbye!), you have a long life to live, you're aggressive, you believe the fortunes in fortune cookies, you worship God and despise the heathens, you day trade in crypto currencies, you're the 99 percent, your mother is dead, you're a virgin, you have an eating disorder, you're lactose intolerant but you always crave cheese, you suffer from coulrophobia, you have traveled the world in search of nothing, you were born over international waters, your uncle is nuts, your sister is getting married soon, your half-brother sells frozen yogurt for a living, you're a victim of senescence.

You're at least one of these things and I'm at least two. On a good day, I'm three. Remember that.

The pollution club has a dance floor designed by a Mongolian immigrant named Batbold. The ceiling has over 2,500 black lights interspersed with strobe lights. The corners of the club are tenebrous and mysterious, a perfect place to fuck or be fucked. In the center of the floor is a cream-colored stupa adorned with mirrors. On top of the stupa are light-up eyes with multifarious lasers that respond to the choons. The walls are coated with velvet speakers and pencil-thin LCD screens. Boom boom goes the bass as people lose face.

The floor tilts backward and forward, increasing the chances of vomiting. Smart enough to realize this, Batbold built a vomit trough on both sides of the dance floor. The vomit funnels into a cement truck outside, where it's churned until morning comes. The following day, it's freeze-packed at a factory on the outskirts of LA and shipped off to third world

nations under the highly successful Vomit-For-Petrol Program started by the UN.

All around the dance floor, people perch like long-nosed gargoyles inhaling pollutants from pollution masks. No one sits. Instead, people squat on plush cubes stained with three-dimensional world currency symbols that change colors every couple of minutes (they're updated every time a currency gains or drops in value on the global market).

Popular pollutants such as Burberry Third World Exhaust, Prada Stink Bomb Bloody Sundays, White Comma Lead-based Paint, Marc Jacob's Sinsemilla and Clive Christian's Imperial Atrocity are pumped into various pollution masks. The pollutant clouds mingle with the sweaty bodies on the dance floor. They create an odor that is instantly orgasmic. Delete occhiolism.

Almost everyone wears masks on the tilting dance floor. The DJ, in a caged booth that sits atop the stupa, wears a fluorescent Guy Fawkes mask. All the other masks are various degrees of frightening or anodyne – this shit cray!

As I dance with pregnant Nelly I notice a Lady Gaga meat costume, a Steve Jobs with an apple in his mouth mask, a Minion mask, a Jennifer Lopez booty mask, a zombie Osama Bin Laden mask (with oozing bullet wounds!), A Putin mask shaped like a dick, a classic Cheney snarling mask, a flip phone mask (which is scarier than it sounds), an Angela Merkel mask (also scarier than it sounds) and a Justin Bieber after puberty and before extreme alcoholism mask. Tonight's pre-Halloween party theme is the early 21st century. Long live the aughts!

The people that don't wear masks are generally naked or have their bodies painted in elaborate ways. As is popular with the times (at least in 'Murica, at least in LA), most of the women have a thick nest of pubic hair with braided strands. The men have a straight line shaved from their pubic region to the base of their cocks, a style meant to elongate the appearance of an erection while dancing. Every able-bodied male has the strip, including myself. No one cares about nudity anymore, especially this close to All Hallows' Eve. Confirm and conform.

I'm wearing a pair of jeans, a body-switcher necklace and a shirt that has been unbuttoned all the way down to the last button. *The hardest button to button.* Suave and sophisticated, *muy guapo* I am. On my head is a military cap with the words *ad undas* written in black light responsive paint on the back of the hat. I have no idea what it means, but a guy wearing a plastic Satan mask complimented it as he pinched my ass.

In case you think I've forgotten, I'm still interested in switching bodies with pregnant Nelly. I just need to find the right time to ask her again. I admit, earlier, I might have been a little too assertive with my request. Duly noted. With a few more pollutant shots and some time on the dance floor, I figure I'll be able to take her back to my flat and trade bodies before the ass crack of dawn shifts another day on LA.

I spot Nelly navigating her way through the tilting dance floor. She is def the hottest pregnant woman I've seen in weeks. She has a pair of white contact lenses on and an elaborately jeweled neon *bindi* glued between her eyebrows. Her hair is wrapped in a bun and held together by a light-up chopstick that blinks with a red Coca-Cola advertisement. A skirt hangs from beneath the bulge of her belly to a foot above her kneecaps. Modest. With the C-Baby applied to her stomach, I can see her fetus squirming under the intense black lights. It's a girl, something to be proud of. The species must live on. I take a breather and catapult myself towards a free pollution mask. Mouth-to-mouth that ego!

Note to Reader – it's hard to run on a tilted dance floor. As I near the edge, my knees buckle and I fall forward. I catch the arm of a muscular mustached man wearing a checkered top hat and a flashing bowtie. He slaps me across the face and then hugs me, laughing maniacally. I can taste my blood and his sweat on my upper lip. He licks my chin and bites my earlobe. I push him away, step off the dance floor and reach for a pollution mask.

'I've never kissed a black man!' he screams over the booming bass.

Neither have I.

The masks on the dance floor have a little touchscreen keyboard attached so you can tell the bartenders working in the other room what kind of shot you want. There are also apps that instantly send your order, but I like going manual from time to time. I type in LoathHunAyaTop and a blue light on the tube flickers twice. It turns green. Credit approved – a feeling that will unite humankind for centuries to come.

Thirty seconds later and I'm inhaling my favorite pollute. In a haze, I push the mask to the top of my head and look out onto the dance floor. I catch Nelly dancing with a short woman. She's giggling and swaying left to right feverishly. The baby churns in her pregnant stomach... she must be eight months pregnant at least! My sweet lord is nature beautiful!

'That's my body,' I say to a fat man wearing a Burger King crown. His belly is pulled up by a pair of red suspenders, allowing me to see his nether regions. He's the first man I've seen in a long time *without* a strip shaved through his pubes. In place of the strip is an equal sign. Can you believe that? Who's equal these days!? Who's ever been equal? What's he thinking? Even the President has a strip!

Maybe he's on the verge of a new fashion trend I'm yet unaware of. Instinctively, I want to close my eyes and log into iNet and image search 'new pubic hair styles'. I refrain from GoogleFacing impulsively because I don't want him to think I care. Never let someone think you care. The less you care the better you fare. Fake it 'til you make it or beat it 'til you can beat it.

The man turns to me and spits a piece of gum into his hand, 'Do you want to switch bodies?'

Fish lip jiggle tits. He shows me the bubble gum, his flush face beaming with anticipation. The gum has a few iridescent blue specks in it. *A body-switcher*. I've never seen such a clever body-switcher before. I've seen used soda cans, chewed pencils, bent thumb tacks and empty make-up containers, but I've never seen a piece of gum. Personally, I use a guitar pick (which is currently hanging from my neck).

'You can chew it?'

'No, no,' he says. 'I just keep it in my mouth under my tongue. I wouldn't actually chew it. The name is Sauria, by the way.'

Sauria was definitely into something big. He must have purchased the device illegally in Hong Kong. I've read many articles about the illegal body-switching technology they have there. He must switch bodies all the time. Maybe he works for the FCG. He was fat enough to at least be on the city council. I eyed the man suspiciously, not sure what to make of him. The ends of his smile disappear into his chubby pig cheeks.

'Do you work for the FCG?' I ask point blank.

He nearly takes a swing at me. 'Do I work for the Federal Corporate Government? Is that what you're asking?'

'Yeah...'

He changes the subject. 'It sure was sunny today.' He pulls his pollution mask over his face and takes another swig. He's puffing on some Japanese stuff called Uniqlo Wet Dream Poi.

'How's the Qlo?' I ask, still watching Nelly on the tilting dance floor. She's now surrounded by two naked men gyrating their cocks to the music. I needed to get over there pronto before those dicks take my booty.

'You never answered my question...' He pushes his mask up so it can rest on his shiny forehead.

'Hey, I have to go.' I point at pregnant Nelly. 'I'm trying to switch bodies with her.'

'She's prego!' He shakes his head and burps. 'Been there, done that. It's fun, but my life's way better. You don't want the cramps she's about to get. The mood swings, the morning sickness, the constant need to go to the bathroom. Why a pregnant lady?'

'Life experience. Maybe I want to see how it feels to give birth,' I say.

'That's the stupidest thing I've heard all night.' The fat man coughs and scratches his ass. 'It hurts like hell and the monster that comes out of there ain't worth the trouble. Look, do you want to have some real fun?'

'Sure, who doesn't?' I ask. I watch as the two men lead Nelly away. There goes my prize.

'Forget about her!' Sauria slaps me across the back. 'Look, I have a couple of nineteen year olds in the VIP room. Why don't you join us there?' He coughs again, pounding his fist against his chest. 'The FCG is paying for the VIP room tonight. They're always paying...'

'I thought you didn't work for the FCG...'

'Everyone works for the Federal Corporate Government, whether they'd care to admit it or not.' He harrumphs. 'Last offer. Yes or no?'

'Why me?'

'You're not a terrorist are you?'

'No, but why me?'

'It's your hat, I like it. *Ad undas*... it means something about waves or coasting along. You got good style. I like to be surrounded by beautiful people. I like your beautiful black skin, it's such a sexy purple under these lights. The name's Sauria, by the way.'

'You told me already. I'm Meme.'

'What was that?' he shouts over the boom boomy choons.

'My name is Meme,' I say as we shake hands.

THREE ∞

******The following conversation took place in Spanish after the pregnant Nelly ditched the hyper-intoxicated Meme. It has been translated by the late José Alberto Del Castillo Cabeza Mercedes Acosta III for our monolingual audience.

‘So, can you come to pick up the shipment the shipment?’ Carloza asked.

Pregnant Nelly was sitting in the restroom at POLLUTION CLUB 512 chatting with him on GoogleFace. Every time she blinked, she could see Carolozas image splash across her eyelids. As always, he sat in an unknown location in Tijuana. He looked comfortable in his loose fitting shorts and crisp white tank top. Curly jet black hair peaked out from under his wife beater. Behind him: a Freda motif stretched across his wall to the point that it was pixilated.

‘Sure,’ she said. ‘Let me just message Noah and tell him. What time?’

Noah was Nelly’s personal Humandroid assistant. He served as her driver, her cook, her cleaner and her best friend.

‘Afternoon, you know I sleep late...’ Carloza yawned to emphasize his statement.

‘How are the pollutes anyway? Tasty?’

‘*Muy bueno*,’ he said. ‘Some stuff from Bhutan... you know the stuff...’

‘Seriously? How did you come across that?’ Nelly placed her hand across her stomach. She looked down and smiled at her fetus illuminated by the C-Baby lotion. She burped and the baby moved.

He laughed, ‘You know I can’t tell you that. Hold on a sec, k?’

She looked at the door of the stall as it rattled. Someone had been jiggling the handle for the last five minutes in a passive aggressive attempt to suggest that Nelly’s time on the throne had ended.

As she waited for Carloza to return, Nelly reread the quote scrawled in mascara across the backside of the door:

Many a subtle philosopher has failed to solve himself, owing to his inability to discern his beginning and his end.

‘Sorry about that,’ Carloza said, his voice appearing in Nelly’s ear.

‘Who was it?’

‘Can’t tell you.’

‘Hey, are you going to be in there all night?’ a voice yelled from outside the stall. The door rattled again. Nelly looked down and noticed a pair of shimmering six-inch high heels covered in red spikes.

‘Find another stall bitch,’ Nelly whispered in English.

‘What was that?’ Carloza laughed. ‘Are you speaking English my love? Where are you?’

‘Restroom.’

‘Really? You out tonight?’

‘Can’t you hear the music?’ she asked.

‘I thought you were listening to music in your aeros...’

‘How could I be in my aeros without Noah? He’s my driver,’ Nelly said. The irate woman shook the door handle again.

‘Good point.’

‘Meet anybody?’

‘Hung out with two guys for a bit. Also this other guy; I don’t remember his name, though. Black guy. Big hands.’

‘Seriously, all the other stalls are full! I can hear you talking on GoogleFace in Spanish bitch,’ the woman outside Nelly’s stall said.

‘Hold on,’ Nelly told Carloza. She reached into her tiny Flapper purse and pulled out a small mistmask. Two carbon filters emerged after she pressed a button on the nose of the mistmask.

‘What are you doing?’ Carloza asked.

‘Just a minute.’

Nelly placed the mistmask over her face and adjusted the nose piece. She held the button down for two seconds and goggles extended upward from the cheek coverings. As the woman continued to rattle the door handle, Nelly quickly secured the goggles into the crevices of her eyes. She pressed a small lever on the chin of the mask, releasing the trapped air inside. She felt the mask tighten as it pressurized.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

‘Hurry up bitch!’

Nelly reached into her purse and pulled out something that resembled a miniature tube of toothpaste with a nozzle on top. She flipped opened the top, pointed it at the door and pressed her thumb against the nozzle.

Fisssssp!

A green mushroom cloud engulfed the entire bathroom.

The woman’s forehead smashed into the door and landed in a thick pile of yellow hair on the floor. Women fell from the toilets, their heads and bodies landing in various ways inside the stuffy stalls.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

Nelly looked down and saw the woman’s hair creeping beneath the door. Blood from her nose had already started seeping into her bleached hair. Rose stained platinum; a fatal blonde

moment. She flushed the toilet and stood, hearing another body drop near the sink. *Thunk*.

Nelly opened the bathroom stall and stepped in the woman's nest of blonde hair with the heel of her shoe. She glanced down at her watch – it would be another minute until the mist disappeared.

‘Sounds like you’re done clearing out the place...’ Carloza said.

‘Some things just have to be done.’

He laughed. ‘Well, I need to see someone about the next shipment. Saturday, same time, same place.’

‘I’ll see you then,’ Nelly said, her voice muffled by the mistmask. ‘*Adiosito*.’

Where are you right now?

Are you at home? Are you on a train? Are you in an airplane? Are you outside? Are you in your closet? Are you on the toilet? Are you in the break room at your job? Are you in a coffee shop? Are you in a bathtub? Are you reading this on an electronic reading device? Are you on a balcony? Are you thinking about something else as you read these words? Is someone else reading this to you? Are you reading it using a flashlight?

When you read something, does it form a picture of what's happening in your brain? Could you see the mustached man slapping me in the face before embracing me? Could you picture Nelly's baby illuminated by the black lights? Could you imagine the bartender pouring a beverage out of the tip of his gnarly dreadlock? Could you visualize Sauria with his Burger King crown and the suspenders holding up his jelly rolls?

We take this picture forming function of consciousness for granted. We read a thriller about a serial killer and we imagine him cutting up the bodies, blood misting onto his t-shirt like a Japanese anime – we do this as if it were nothing, as if it requires no effort. More than twenty-five percent of the calories we consume daily go to brain functioning. Our brains are voracious.

See this now – the panicked look on the victim's face. A woman. Her hair matted and crimson, her body lifeless. The killer. A man with serpentine veins running up and down his arms and a brow that grazes the floor. The book. Cutting the chapters in just the right way to provide tension, to make it seem as if it's really happening. The stereotype. The archetype. The pattern. The routine. The reward.

The pattern.

It seems as if we take in the written image as if it were natural occurrence. No matter the potential real life consequences, implied or intended, writing has a way of patronizing everything. Be it a graphic sex scene, a magical game of Quidditch, complex sleuth work that runs all the way up to the Papacy, a gruesome account of war, an illicit romance between a pathetic vampire and a ballsy human, a work of supposed merit that we read simply to say that we've read it.

Don't open that door! Don't walk out into those woods alone! Don't go jogging at night! Don't invite the pizza man into your home! Don't kiss him! Don't close this book! Don't close this book!

Feed your brain.

We visualize these things as if they're happening, as if we're somehow existing within the books that we read. Of course, we know that we aren't taking part in what's happening. We know we're silent observers, passing judgment and driving the story further with the turn of

each page. This doesn't stop us from biting our nails, skipping sentences to see what happens or putting a book aside because it's either too complex or too anticlimactic. Are you not entertained!?

No matter how we consume it, the author tosses crumbs at us as we follow him or her along. We accept all. Hands on our ankles, thighs sky high – full-on penetration. We drop the soap repeatedly for the sake of literature.

Does a novel stop when we put it down? Do the characters wait in limbo for us to return so they can finish their story? Do they tire of telling the same story time and time again? How does a movie affect the image of the character we have formed in our heads? Do our protagonists always resemble some part of us?

Sauria explains all this to me in between puffs from a nacre pollution mask in the highly exclusive VIP room. He worked in the electronic publishing industry for a number of years and even wrote a book on the home installation of pollution mask bars. He was now the owner of a global security analysis company called Executive Executions or ExEx. The totem pole has been scaled.

I can barely make out the details of Sauria's face. He's blurry and fishy, greasy and curdled. This might be the most shwasted I've ever been off pollutants. Suddenly, his face stretches. His nose warps into a small black hole as if he's being sucked through a straw. He is everyman. I watch a large pair of doughy breasts bounce on his chest, one at a time. Hairy nipples. My skin is crawling. His pupils are dilated. Grizzled old yegg. I suddenly miss pregnant Nelly's large white contacts.

Sauria presses a button on the edge of the table and the wall next to us folds away like an accordion. *Our private room is now crowded.* 'Take a look, Meme,' he says, waving his hand at the folding wall. He's my fat business messiah. I'm his sheep watching as he parts the waters. I'll do anything for you my bloated compadre!

On the other side of the wall are the women he promised. One pregnant woman stands, applying more C-Baby lotion to her belly, squeezing the liquid out of a small red and white tube. Next to her are a pair of nineteen-year-olds twins with bangs and another moll wearing a spiked S&M mask. Seven fat men wearing nothing but blue silk ties, suspenders and nipple rings complete their scene. All their pubic regions are shaved into equal signs.

Maybe we really are equal these days.

The seven fat men laugh and wink at the twins. Their jowls slosh against their chests like wedding cakes made out of pink Jello. They wave at Sauria; one of them points from the skybox window down to the dance floor below.

'Look!' he shouts. 'Amazeballs!'

Two porcelain transvestites on stilts are circling the tilting floor below. Their stilts are black light responsive and covered in yellow and pink dots. One wears a Santa Claus mask, the other's face is painted like a *Dia de los Muertos* skeleton. A pair of palanquin carriers lug a blubbery woman behind them. She smiles as she tosses pollute candy to the mortals.

I've never been to the VIP room at a pollution club and I'm mesmerized at how the other side lives. Pollution masks made of various animal skulls line the pig metal bar. Above the bartender is a black light chandelier made of crystal and small tubes from vintage pollution

masks. The bartender's dreadlocks are white. The bosomy beauty wears a tight fitting shirt with a mechanical hound on it and the numbers 451 stenciled in neon orange letters across her chest. Floating above her right shoulder is a hovering LCD screen showing the latest stock prices and currency fluctuations. Sell sell sell!

I look down at my jeans and notice the fat man is running his fingers along my thigh. I try to push him away, but the pollutes have taken their toll and movement has become increasingly difficult. He tickles my waist and invites me to join his friends in the other room. I take one more puff from the pollution mask – John Galliano strawberry arse if I'm not mistaken.

We scoot in next to the other fat men. One of the twins comes and sits on the other side of me. She wears a starched nurse's outfit that barely covers her. Her top is unbuttoned. As she leans forward I can see her nipples peeking out from her bra. She yanks one of the pollution masks off the wall and takes a big, comical swig from it. She falls back onto the couch dramatically and sighs, smiling at me.

'Your name?' she asks. Her voice is slightly muffled by the pollution mask.

'What?'

'Your name?' She looks me over through the polypropylene eye holes of the pollution mask. She's wearing a pair of large black contact lenses that wash out all the white in her eyes.

'Meme Lamar. You?' I ask her. Sauria's hands move from my knee to his suspenders.

'Yeshi.' She pushes the mask to the top of her skull. The nose of the pollution mask looms over her face, perfect for dangling a carrot. 'My name's Yeshi.'

'Nice to meet you...' I look to Sauria to see if he's paying attention to our conversation. He's laughing with the other fat men, pointing at the transvestite stilt walkers on the floor below. One of the walkers has a patron clinging to the bottom of the stilt, humping it forcefully. A beefy security guard in all black can be seen rushing towards the man with an extendable shepherd's crook.

'What do you do, Meme?' Yeshi she moves closer to me. She lightly grazes my ribcage with her long finger nails. Her pollution mask comes off; she hangs it on the argentine hook above the couch. She sweeps her bangs out of her face and winks at me. Her two-inch eye lashes take a good five seconds to reach the tops of her cheeks. Mesmerized I am. Fornicate I desire.

'I'm a therapist.'

How can I possibly sneak away with Yeshi? I need to ditch Burger King Sauria pronto!

'Really? How exciting. Have you ever fucked a Humandroid?' She bends forward and starts licking my bicep.

'No! I wouldn't do that. Ever. It's against protocol... what about you?' I ask. I reach up, grab a pollution mask and take a deep inhale. My eyes roll back into my head. My brain macerates further. Pollute dipsomaniac.

I blink twice and see that there are now two Yeshis sitting cross legged next to me. As I stare at the two life forms, a glassine wave sluices into the room from the viewing window

and imbrues the two Yeshis. The water leaves a patina glaze across their faces as it drips down onto their matching nurse's outfits.

What the fuck is happening?

I take the pollution mask off and rub my eyes. No way is this actually happening. *You're tripping, Meme.*

The face of the second Yeshi contorts into a grotesque mask. The couch suddenly appears to be the length of a school bus. The second Yeshi hops over the first and begins crawling towards me.

She crawls quickly on the tips of her fingernails, her broken chin almost touching the couch. Her jaw swings to the left and to the right like a suicidal seesaw. Green residue drips off her hunched-over shoulders and onto the couch. A light flickers overhead, bathing the couch in a lambent hue. Each flicker sends lightning bolts rhizomically across the room.

The couch continues to stretch, increasing the distance between myself and Yeshi number two. Yeshi number one sits on the far end of the couch, her eyes rolled back into her head and her hand on her crotch. I'm sweating profusely, practically panting. Convulsing. I feel as if I will vomit soon. This can't be happening.

'What's wrong with you?' a sweet voice asks, filtering into my right ear. 'Baby, what's wrong?'

'They're coming...' I watch in horror as Yeshi number two melts. 'They're coming and there's nothing we can do about it!'

To continue reading *Life is a Beautiful Thing*, [sign up for my reader's group](#) and I'll send you a free copy of **Book One and Book Two**. You can also get the books [here on Amazon](#).

Harmon Cooper

www.harmoncooper.com



To kill is to be part of The Loop – the name of the game is main.

Quantum Hughes' life is stuck on repeat.

While trapped in The Loop, a virtual entertainment dreamworld, he struggles to free himself from a glitch that forces him to re-live the same day over and over. Everything changes after Quantum receives a mysterious message from a woman named Frances Euphoria, the first human player he has made contact with in years.

Once Frances appears, members of the Reapers, a murder guild, begin surfacing in The Loop, hoping to capture Quantum, or worse - kill him. To further complicate matters, The Loop itself is doing everything it can to stop Quantum from escaping.

With time running out, will Quantum break free from The Loop before he's captured or killed by the Reapers? Who is Frances Euphoria, and what does she actually know about how long Quantum has been trapped in the virtual dreamworld?

The thin line between dream and reality is pixilated.

Two sample chapters on the next page. [Available on Amazon here.](#)

(sample) The Feedback Loop

Book One

Harmon Cooper

Day 545

I'm afraid to die even though I know I can't die. This fear is what drives me to kill indiscriminately, to maim as many as I can in The Loop. The day resets at midnight, regardless if Cinderella has been laid or not. The difference then between Cinderella and The Loop is that there are no happy endings here. There is no Prince Charming; there is no light at the end of the tunnel.

There is only me, and I am royally shafted.

'Who told you my name!?' I scream into the face of the man that I choked yesterday (and the day before that, and the day before that). 'Who sent you here!'

'Let... me... go!'

Morning Assassin spits digital blood into my face, baring his pearly whites. He is a gangly man, sharp-faced and always sneering, sneering like he's in on some joke that I can't possibly understand. I slam him against the floor for good measure.

Keeping one hand on his neck, I stick my finger in the air to activate the player menu. I retrieve a pair of brass knuckles, item 229, from my inventory list. They appear instantly on my knuckles, gleaming and ready to deliver punishment.

'I'm sick of playing this game. Tell me who sent you!'

Morning Assassin laughs as my fist connects with the bridge of his nose. His data indicates that he is an NPC, a non-player character just like all the others, a feat of artificial, game-based intelligence. *He's not real.*

A second punch from my brass knuckles makes him laugh even harder, his teeth shatter with my third shot.

'Who sent you!?' I scream to no avail.

'Goodbye, Quantum.' Morning Assassin's blood-rimmed lips open wide and the barrel of a weapon pops out of his throat.

He blasts me in the face before I can roll away.

Day 546

I respawn a day later, the sound of feedback rippling inside my skull. *Damn the feedback.* No alarm clock wakes me; I'm up naturally at this godforsaken time, glaring at the digital sun filling my hotel room with strips of bitter light.

One must sleep, even in a virtual entertainment dreamworld like The Loop. I suppose 'wait to respawn' would be a better explanation for what I've just experienced, but I like to think of it as sleep due to the humanizing nature of slumber. It's a nice way to remind myself that I'm human, that my body still exists in the real world.

Morning Assassin will be here soon. He comes every day at 8:05 – I expect nothing less from him today. There has never been a weapon in his mouth before, but he has killed me on several occasions.

I access my inventory list and select an ice pick, item 538, that I found about a week ago.

My list is the only way to keep track of how long I've been stuck in The Loop. Thus far, there are 544 items in my list. I add a single cigarette sitting on the nightstand near me to account for yesterday's quick and sudden death. Now there are 545 items. I'll find something later today to mark day 546.

It's the only way to keep track of how long I've been imprisoned.

8.05 AM.

Morning Assassin smashes through the window, as he has done the last 545 days in a row. I'm behind him in a heartbeat, driving the ice pick into his NPC skull. Blood sprays and he falls; I'm unable for the 546th time to get information out of him. I can try again tomorrow morning.

My Loop-life is planned to a T. Once I kill the assassin, a crow flies by the window over my bed. It lands on the ledge outside the window, pecks its beak against the glass. A dark cloud passes in front of the sun, ready to add carnal rain to the shit-stained streets outside the hotel. From there it's to the dresser.

I don't have to get dressed in The Loop like a normal person. At the blink of an eye, I'm in a pair of black boots with loosened shoelaces, stompers with steel toes. The mirror across my hotel room tells me that my hair is already slicked back, my skin almost translucent, my eyes dark, lifeless, dull, sorrowful, frosted. I can change any number of the things through my attributes menu, from my hair color to my eye color to my size and my girth. This has no effect on my stats.

I decide to go with a hat for today, selecting it from a drop down menu that appears in the air before me. The benefits of a virtual entertainment dreamworld needn't be explained here – everything is accessible at my fingertips aside from freedom... aside from a way to log out of The Loop.

I chose a black military cap, tight, with a short brim. Strips of my blond hair grow out of the bottom of the hat, stylizing itself. It isn't hard to look good in The Loop.

I kick open my door, just in case there is someone in the hallway stalking me. While the happenings around me are always the same, sometimes there is a surprise or two, which leaves me to believe that something is watching me, cynically monitoring my cyclical existence. Possibly the NVA Seed, but I've long since given up my search for the world's puppet master.

The lights in the narrow hallway flicker.

Once, twice, three times, just like they always do. They turn off for twenty seconds and turn back on. Something falls downstairs, indicating that the next group of assassins has arrived. A quick scroll through my inventory list and I decide to wing it this time.

There's nothing like a little hand-to-hand combat to kick start my day.

~*~

Nonstop kicks. I arrive downstairs and my avatar leaps into slow-motion as six men attack me all at once. 546 days is a long time to fight the same NPC thugs every morning. My movement through the air is fluid, calculated, enhanced by my advanced abilities bar.

I'm good, dammit.

Think *The Matrix* meets Bruce Lee meets The Force if it helps to understand my capabilities in this virtual entertainment dreamworld. The Loop has its advantages, including the ability to break the laws of gravity and to flick the bird at the space-time continuum, at least until my advanced abilities bar depletes.

I'm in the air above the six assassins, my feet connecting with their skulls, volleying off one and tapping against the next. Kick kick kick go the feet and I don't even need an ice pick to take these NPCs goons out because they are much weaker than Morning Assassin, much weaker. I drop down behind the last of the six, cracking his neck backwards over my shoulder as he cries out in a way that sounds like he may be British.

I turn to them and retrieve a Colt 500 from my inventory list, item 466. Six elephantine shots later and someone better call the hotel's janitor. Smoking barrel, smoldering bodies. One glance across the hotel lobby and I spot the NPC doorman cowering behind a potted plant.

'Morning Jim,' I say. 'Sorry about the mess.'

'Good morning, Mr. Hughes. It's quite all right.'

Jim stands slowly, straightening the front of his uniform. The dead look in his eyes indicate that he is playacting, that he is responding in an Non Player Character way to the violence he has just witnessed. What I wouldn't give to see some true human emotion, rather than something hacked up by an advanced algorithm, some regurgitated feeling, bird-vomited from one NPC to another.

'Please, call me Quantum,' I tell him for the umpteenth time. 'Are there any messages for me?'

There have never been any messages for me, but I always check anyway. After all, it's better to have hope in a hopeless place than to be hopeless in a hopeless place.

Trying to get information out of Jim through torture and other methods has proven to be relatively fruitless. I generally leave him alone these days, greeting him before leaving in the morning and saying goodnight if I'm lucky enough to return in the evening. Sometimes I kill him just for the hell of it.

'No messages, sir,' he says. He transfers beads of sweat from his forehead to the front of his pants. The sweating swine. *I should do something about him...*

I'm nearly out the door when Doorman Jim calls my name. 'Mr. Hughes, I mean Quantum! There is one message, sir!'

'A message?' I turn to him. 'Transfer it to my inventory.'

The message appears in my inventory list, item number 546. I access it and read it twice.

Impossible.

'What is it, Mr. Hughes?'

'Please, call me Quantum.'

'What is it, Mr. Quantum?'

I retrieve the Colt 500 from my list and shoot him in the chest. 'My apologies, Jim.'

~*~

Violence is rewarded, or should I say, was rewarded in The Loop.

Doorman Jim is merely a daily causality in The Loop, a virtual entertainment dreamworld that used to grade a person on how many people they killed that day. The higher your kill count, the higher you moved up on the Hunter List.

I was the top hunter the day The Loop began repeating itself, hence the reason everyone is after me. This is what makes me both anxious and excited to see a message from an actual person; at least I assume it is an actual person. NPCs don't normally send messages.

Quantum,

I've returned for you. Meet me in Devil's Alley as soon as you receive this.

Frances Euphoria

'Frances Euphoria?' I savor the name a few times, realizing it is likely a trap. I know then that it can't be a real person contacting me. Real people don't exist in The Loop, haven't for nearly two years. *Some group of randomly-generated NPCs is out to get me.* The thought of this makes me smile; at least it won't be a boring day.

One glance at the street confirms that it is dreary outside, as is every day in The Loop. The dreamworld was developed to cater to the Cyber Noir crowd, a niche market for those who like grit and tech, extreme violence, dark corners, sleuth-work, nineteen fifties styling with futuristic weapons. Cyber Noir was a subgenre that took off in the 2050s, at a time when androids, called Humandroids, were replacing the workforce and governments were

incorporating. VE dreamworlds, created through neuronal algorithms by the Proxima Company, became a swell way to escape, and I would still think they were a swell way to escape if I wasn't trapped in one.

The world I am trapped in is as virtual as it is dreamscape, as inside my brain as it is prefab. A normal person spends six years of their lives dreaming – if I ever get out of here, I'll grudgingly add two to this number.

A wind picks up, hurling a tin can down the street. I don't even need to check the time. 8:17 AM, the minute of the tin can. It always stops directly in front of a vandalized trashcan, spins twice, settles.

Of course, I've tried a variety of different exit points from the hotel. I've leapt from rooftop to rooftop, sat and had coffee, slept in (after killing the morning assassin), and even gone room to room, trying to see if there were any clues that would free me from The Loop.

What I've discovered is this – every way out of my hotel has its own pre-determined history. If I go to the roof, lightning cracks in the sky above, connecting with an antenna on a building in the distance. If I go room to room, I encounter a man snoring as a prostitute in a garter belt steals his money. Both are NPCs and I've killed both of them dozens of times.

If I have a cup of Joe and some pancakes courtesy of Dolly, a chef runs out of the hotel's kitchen at exactly 8:23 with a butcher knife trying to slice and dice me. (His meat clever marks day 123 in my inventory – it is great for hacking). If I sleep in, another morning assassin comes at 9:29. If I sleep in past that, another one comes at 10:34.

And so on.

There is no escape from The Loop or the repetition. This is why the message intrigues me so – it is a true break from the repetitive nature of my Loop-life.

~*~

Reading the message for the third time doesn't give me any more clues about its origin. And why does the person named Frances say *I've returned for you*? The only people that care about my condition are the people keeping me alive in the real world; at least I assume there is someone keeping me alive up there. For all I know I may be an imprint of consciousness, a ball of neuronal echoes that has outlived my human body.

My dreams say otherwise.

Almost every night I dream that someone is waking me, that someone is seeing to me and taking care of me. If only this were true. If only The Loop was as forgiving as my dreams. Still, my dreams are equally suffocating. I can't wake up from them, no matter how hard I urge myself, no matter how hard I push myself forward in hopes of tearing from the virtual dream ether.

No matter how hard.

I raise my hand to hail a taxi. There are always taxis in The Loop, old ones, the type you'd imagine driving around New York in the 1940s. The only difference is these taxis hover, similar to the aeros vehicles used in the real world.

A taxi always stops if you raise your hand in The Loop. They don't have preprogrammed histories like most of the other things that occur during my day. They only come when I want them to come. Of course, there are more interesting ways to travel in The Loop. If I wanted, I could pull an NPC driver out of his car, kill him or her, and take their car, but it's generally less hassle to travel peacefully. Besides, I'd like to make it to Devil's Alley in one piece.

A taxi lowers to the ground, its engine kicking and thumping. I get in the taxi and the driver turns to me. 'Where to, buddy?' He smells like oil and tuna fish sandwiches. His huge egg-headed grin nearly escapes into the sides of his boiler hat.

'To the bowels of the city,' I say. 'Make it quick.'

'Devil's Alley, eh? You got it.'

The taxi coughs some fumes as if lifts into the air. It doesn't need to cough fumes, but everything here is designed to look old, to be scratched and used, polluted. Dented, twisted, blemished, cracked, pockmarked, ripped – the participle adjectives of The Loop are endless. One glance at the seat and I see the upholstery is torn.

'What's new?' the driver asks as he speeds along, weaving around other vehicles.

'You're kidding, right?'

Sometimes I don't know if the NPC's are screwing with me or if they really don't know that I've been living the same day for nearly two years. I think Morning Assassin gets it, but the others...

'Kidding? What do you mean?' he coughs, bangs his hand against his chest. The rain picks up and he flicks on his little windshield wipers; the digital water hits the windshield only to be whipped off by tiny wipers. There's something beautiful about it, but I'm too distracted by the driver's blabbering to really appreciate it.

'Hey, kid, I'm talking to you. What do you mean?'

'I mean I live the same day every damn day. Why are we still talking?'

'If you want another driver I can let you off here...' he begins to lower his cab.

I access my inventory list and snag item number 399 – a taser. I press the button on the handle and sparks erupt in the back seat, matching the lightning outside.

'Jesus!' the driver says, nearly swerving into another aeros in the opposite airline.

'Goose it and keep quiet. Don't get in a wreck you son of a bitch.'

'All right, mister, relax.'

I enjoy the rest of the trip to Devil's Alley in relative silence. Once we've landed, I transfer credit to the driver, who is still angry I threatened him, and step out onto the street. Credit is used for most transactions in The Loop and I have an unlimited supply, pennies from heaven. No matter how much I spend, my account resets itself to the maximum amount allowable every morning. Too bad there isn't anything I want to buy.

Devil's Alley is a big place, but I'm pretty sure Frances Euphoria will want to meet me at Barfly's, the seediest joint one can find themselves at inside The Loop. As I move deeper into the slum, NPCs gravitate towards me, wearing trench coats and covering their faces with dark umbrellas. A prostitute in a shiny red bomber jacket spins her umbrella behind her head,

giving her a tragic halo. A tranny plays with his ding-a-ling on the fire escape overlooking the entrance to the alley. A cat hisses at a giant rat scurrying through a pile of trash bags. Muscled kookies mill about cruisin' for a bruise'.

I step into one of the alleys, over an NPC fiend shivering in the cold rain. A hand reaches out and latches onto my ankle.

'Hey buddy...' the fiend cackles. 'Can you spare some credit?'

I transfer him half of everything I have. 'That should be enough to buy some Riotous.'

The lights of the alley paint themselves diagonally across his face as he fumbles with something in his pocket. 'Are you mocking me?' he asks, pulling a switchblade. He twists the blade in the air like a drunken conductor. 'You think you can just give me money like I'm some sort of charity case!?'

The fiends in The Loop are bastards, a class of downgraded guttersnipes, slumdog tramps addicted to a drug known as Riotous. I press my finger into the air, accessing my inventory list. A drop-down menu appears in front of me; the bum is momentarily frozen as I make my selection. Day 171's item will do the trick. A sledge hammer appears in my hands and I swing it at the vagrant, connecting with his chest. He slams into the wall, sending digital debris cauliflowering into the air between us.

'Hey! You can't do that to him!' An even grungier fiend is on his feet and I'm behind him before he can reach me. One swing of the sledgehammer and he too becomes Humpty Dumpty.

~*~

Barfly's neon sign flickers at the end of the alley. People move through the shadows leading up to the place, speaking in hushed whispers, leaching off one another. Grit for breakfast, a kick in the teeth for lunch, home before dinner in a coffin carried by skeletal pallbearers – welcome to my life. Many dismal days have been spent sitting in this bar, drinking to the point of faux-inebriation and fighting my way across The Loop, only to wake up the following morning in my bed as if nothing happened. Being bored is an understatement.

'Quantum.' The doorman claps his arm across my shoulders. He is a chiseled guy, his face angular and rough like one of the faces of Mount Rushmore. This guy would give Teddy a run for his money. Trust me, I know – I've dealt with Croc several times after things got out of hand at Barfly's.

'I'll behave,' I say instead of hello.

'You always do,' he says with a twinkle in his swollen eyes.

Maybe I'm spooked. I've lived the same day so many times in a row that there are surely things I haven't noticed in the 545 previous days. It kind of makes me wonder how much I missed when the days weren't on repeat, when The Loop (the name I've given it) was a game/entertainment dreamworld known as *Cyber Noir* that I liked to play.

'You're looking for someone?' Croc asks, chewing on a toothpick.

‘You can tell? Some NPC you are...’

‘NPC?’

Non Player Characters never refer to themselves as NPCs, which only makes this place more maddening. Sometimes I think I’m the crazy one... sometimes.

‘Frances Euphoria. Anyone here by that name?’ I ask. A quick scan across the bar tells me the usual suspects are present – drunks, lounge lizards, gamblers and con artists no matter what the clock reads. Getting ossified is the name of the game.

‘Frances Euphoria...’

‘Well, Croc?’

‘Never heard the name before. Find a seat and maybe someone will sit down.’

His face grows mean and I oblige – no sense in stirring the ashes with this one. I sit at the same barstool I always sit at, on the far left hand side of the bar, facing the door so I can see who comes in. One can only be cracked in the back of the head by a pool cue so many times before realizing it may be time to change seats.

The bartender, a grizzled old bastard by the name of Cid, pours me a pint and slides it across the counter. Digital beer foam spills out the top and onto my hand, not quite giggle water, but it’ll do.

Instead of saying thanks I nod. Cid winks and his raccoon eyebrows practically touch the top of his cheek.

A woman enters, a dame, a stacked looker. Her hair is red, her skin bone white. She’s in all black, like me, aside from the fact that she’s wearing a V-neck dress that shows just a hint of cleavage. We lock eyes and I know instantly that it is Frances. The triangular icon over her head indicates she’s an actual person, not an NPC. Blue – the color of life, and I’m not going to lie, I’m simply mesmerized by the color. *Almost two years...*

‘Frances Euphoria?’ I wipe the beer foam off my lips.

‘Three Kings Park, seven o’clock tomorrow night.’

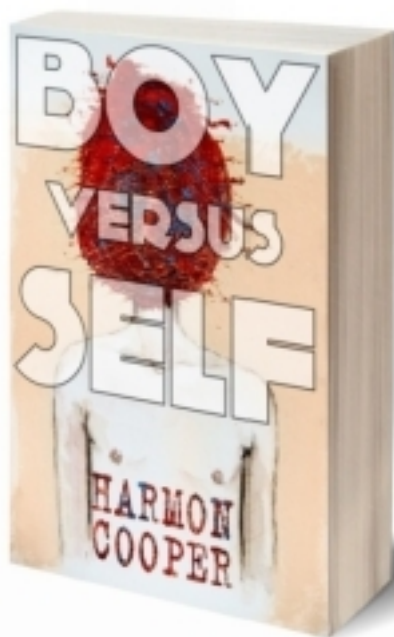
Her arm morphs into an enormous serrated blade. She jabs me in the chest and I’m dead before my pint hits the floor.

Reader,

The Feedback Loop is out July 30th. [It is available for pre-order here](#). The follow-up will be called...



And it will be out in September.



True fear is easily created and rarely destroyed. True art is always the opposite.

A serrated existence that runs from Austin to Mexico, New York to Tokyo, [Boy versus Self](#) is a disquieting journey into the mind of a penniless artist as he struggles with violent hallucinations that could kill him.

About the book: Writing this book took a lot out of me. I began *Boy versus Self* in 2013, writing by hand and finishing in the fall of that year. The terrifying nature of the book forced me to put it away for a while, in the proverbial desk drawer that Stephen King and others have made so famous. I decided to examine the book again in its entirety at the start of 2015.

One thing is safe to say -- the work still sends a shiver down my spine, but not as much for the ghosts or the various entities Boy encounters within the dark pages. No, it was the pacing of the book, its ups and downs, that made me feel as if I were going insane, both in the parts of the writing process and the subsequent read-through. *Yes, but you're the author*, you may think. In my defense, not reading a book for well over a year allows one to step away from the work, to re-examine its merit and its story with a fresh perspective. It was during this re-examination process that I was able to contemplate the very nature of this book, the nature of mental disorder as seen through the eyes of an artist and the resulting mayhem.

Boy versus Self is part horror, part psychological thriller; a work filled with artistic concepts

and references watered down by the pages of time and years lost to mental decay. It is a book that gives new meaning to the title as the story unfolds, the work which I am most proud of and most frightened by.

The work is available for [pre-order here](#), and it will be released globally on July 31st. If you are interested in receiving an advanced review copy for an honest review on Amazon, send me an e-mail at writer.harmoncooper@gmail.com. Enjoy a lengthy first chapter on the following page.

Warning – this book is not for the faint at heart.

(sample) BOY versus SELF

(A Psychological Thriller)

Harmon Cooper

‘If you cannot please everyone with your deeds and your art, please a few.’

–Gustav Klimt

‘All art is quite useless.’

–Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Chapter 1: Glass Halfie

Boy's Age: 18

It starts with small shards and memories on the dresser Girl shares with Boy. It starts with one piece, the bottom of a beer bottle with the numbers 247000143 pressed into it. The piece of glass is brown, uneven like the petrified jaw of an ancient shark. Girl runs her fingers along it, feels its dull edge push against her skin.

The only person that sees her do it is Boy, but she knows his secret too – she's seen him up at night talking to no one.

He tells her to throw the glass away, but her collection has started, and there's nothing Boy can do about it. He's distracted with his art anyway. So he lets her keep the broken bottle on their shared dresser next to the Old Spice aftershave he uses as cologne.

Within the week, Girl finds a piece of stained glass leaning against the dumpster near their apartment. Nice piece, already red at the tip and blue on the wider end. Thick piece. Once pressed against the skin it feels more or less like a butter knife. Not sharp enough, but still beautiful, so she keeps it.

While Boy watches TV, Girl lays on their bed with her two pieces of glass. She holds the pieces over her head, drops them in close and peers through them at the ceiling light. She wishes she was somewhere else but she doesn't know where.

Her ears perk up when Mom drops an empty glass in the kitchen. 'I'll clean it up!' Girl calls out. 'No!' Mom says, 'Stay back, there's glass everywhere!'

There's glass everywhere!

It's a reason to come forward so she does, dips in quickly while Mom is retrieving the dustbin, palms a sliver of glass shaped like an icicle. The instant the piece of glass is squeezed it draws blood, fresh, beautiful blood.

She runs to her bedroom, opens her palm to see the cut. She licks the blood off her palm, carefully runs her tongue around the sliver of glass. Girl smiles at herself in the mirror on their dresser. Her teeth are vampire red, her eyes are black olives.

The red, the throbbing pain in her palm, the crimson contrast against her teeth, her fixed gaze. It was there, in front of the mirror, in their shabby duplex in Huntington, West Virginia, that Girl grew to love pain, its color, its sting, and its meanings both hidden and blatant.

A few months after her thirteenth birthday, Girl's collection of glass goes from three to twenty-five pieces. Boy continues to let it slide because it seems to make her happy. Half-broken beer bottles with chunks of glass sticking out of their serrated trunks line their dresser like stalagmites. Brown, white, green, clear, yellow. They stand next to each other like wounded soldiers admiring each other's injuries. War-torn courage. There's something skin-tingling about its secondhand aesthetics.

A decision is made – the first word she will carve into her body will be *glass*. The second word will be *halfie*.

Boy's reading a comic book on the couch. He's read the same comic five times by now, Girl knows this, and he will read it several more times before he moves on to the next issue. *Spawn*. He loves the horrifying drawings, the grotesque figures, the big-breasted women. If

he's not reading them, he's drawing them – an endless circle of self-gratification and figure study.

Girl looks at his *X-Men comics* too sometimes, wishing she looked more like Jean Gray than she did Storm. That's her father's fault; the dark Mexican Santiago who she's only seen in photos. Two photos, actually. Mom keeps them hidden, but she knows where to find them.

No matter – Girl closes the bathroom door.

She takes off her shorts and sits down on the toilet seat. She spreads her legs wide. One more deep breath and she lowers the piece of glass. She chooses a spot on the inside of her thigh, a place no one will see.

Girl's not stupid. She knows what people will think if her new cut is in an obvious place. She's not ready to show her words to the world just yet. She smiles as the sharp piece of glass breaks the surface of her smooth skin. The initial pain spreads up and out until her entire leg is on fire. God it feels wonderful.

The blood trails down the inside of her thigh. She watches it fall, smiles faintly as the pain intensifies. Some of the blood gets on the outer rim of the toilet bowl as she finishes the word *glass*. She starts carving the word *halfie* across from it. Somehow, blood has gotten onto her panties. A few droplets hit the bathroom floor and she stands.

Girl pulls her panties off over the fresh wounds and the cotton fills with blood. She says a word she's not quite able to say as convincingly as adults. *Fuck!* She's not angry at the pain, she's angry at her own stupidity in forgetting to take off her panties. She hates to waste clothing, was brought up that way. She can't take many hand-me-downs from her brother so her clothing has to last.

She tosses her panties onto the bathroom floor and turns the shower on. A trail of blood leads from the toilet seat to the bathtub. It looks like someone was stabbed there because someone *was* stabbed there. Girl sets the piece of glass down next to the bar of Dial soap that resembles a hunk of melted candy corn.

The blood dripping down her leg swirls into the water. It's mesmerizing, the little red and clear funnel against the yellowed bathtub. Girl pulls her shirt off, throws it onto the sink.

Half of the perforated holes in the shower head are clogged and the water barely trickles out. She adjusts the pressure; the shower head begins spitting the water in little vomit-like bursts. It pelts her chest and cascades down her body. It mixes with the blood oozing from her freshly cut words. *Her words*. A new chapter is wrought and the book hasn't even started.

As she continues running water over her new wounds, she makes a pact with herself to only cut words that have meaning to her; to only cut words she has thought long and hard about.

Girl lets the water run over her new wounds, watching the blood wash away. She touches the fresh cuts, feels the way her skin has opened small red valleys to accommodate the new words. She wishes that the letters were straighter, wishes she could carve in cursive, or Old English; the words look scribbled, but they were her first, and she'd get better. There would be more.

Girl increases the temperature of the water.

Her latte-colored skin turns cherry blossom pink. Blood falls like cherry blossoms in

droplets, spreading in fractal patterns against the bottom of the bathtub. Her shampoo smells like cherry blossoms. She's never actually seen a cherry blossom. If she saw a cherry blossom, she'd stick it in the space above her ear like a princess. She'd rub the blood red stigmas on her cheeks until they looked flushed. She'd have control.

Steam has now filled the bathroom. Searing water hisses against her frail body. Girl lathers the soap onto her fingers until the soap is lodged under her bitten fingernails; she rubs the soap into her new wounds, pressing the word *halfie* until it stings. Feels good to do that. Feels horribly good.

'Honey!' she hears Mom call from outside the bathroom door. Girl jumps. The door handle jiggles open.

'Mom!'

'Dinner is—'

'Mom!'

'Oh my God!' Mom screams as she sees the blood smeared from the toilet to the bathtub. 'What the hell happened in here?'

'*Close the door!*' Girl yells. She shoves her legs together, as if her Mom can see into the misty shower. Her face tightens; the broiling water no longer stings.

Mom catches her breath, places her hand over her chest. Her eyes zero in on the blood-stained panties. 'Oh, my little baby is growing up,' she whispers, calming down immediately.

Boy comes running. 'What happened?' he asks.

'Your sister is starting her period.' Mom shakes her head at the blood. 'She's made a little bit of a mess.'

'Mom! Close the door!' The sound of the pelleting water has become mocking laughter. Girl pulls her knees in tighter and screams.

'Gross!' Boy says, turning away.

'Calm down, Sweetie. It's not gross... it's a fact of life,' Mom says to Boy's back. 'You hit puberty a few years ago and now it's your sister's turn.'

'It's freaking gross,' Boy says over his shoulder.

'Close the door!' Girl yells again. 'Shithead!'

'Hey! No cuss words! Honey, listen, I want you to clean the blood up, ok? And put a tampon in, ok? You know how to do it, right? Remember how I showed you? It can't get stuck in there, so don't worry.'

'I know!'

Mom steps into the bathroom and opens the cabinet door. 'Ok, I put the tampons on the sink. Remember to sit on the toilet when you put it in, ok?'

The water continues to beat against Girl's knees.

'Also, remember not to flush the tampon down the toilet when you finish with it. We already have that little leak under the sink; we don't need another one. If you flush the tampon, the plumber will have to come out and that costs money.'

‘Ok!’

‘And how often do you change it?’

‘Every. Six. Hours. Mom. Please. Leave.’

‘All right already, don’t be snooty with me. I’m just trying to help. Listen, clean up and then come eat dinner with your brother and me.’



Glass Wings appears the same day that Girl starts her broken glass collection. His wings are small, made from multiple shards of glass. They are squamous and the tips are rimmed with dried blood. Rotten, blemish-ridden skin is stretched over his ribcage. His image is more or less a blurred line, torn at the edges and battered. His face is that of a vulture.

Boy sees the monster, illuminated by the lights from the parking lot outside. Their room is always too bright, like an Alaskan summer. He watches as the repulsive monster hobbles into his room, legs scraping against the floor as his tiny wings ruffle and clink together like wind chimes. The hair on the back of Boy’s neck stands fully erect as a frisson of fear scissors through him.

Boy checks to make sure his sister is still sleeping; she usually sleeps on her stomach with an arm hanging off the bed. He looks for Girl’s arm and sees it. Relieved, he turns back to the ghost, to the mangled monstrosity, to the most horrible thing he’s ever seen.

Glass Wings.

The wretched creature is admiring a piece of glass on their dresser with his back turned to Boy. Small slits cover the flesh of his back, oozing with blackened blood. His tiny wings pulsate slightly.

‘H-h-hello?’ Boy is trembling so hard the bed is shaking. His eyes are burning hot, his legs are numb, his nerves shot.

Glass Wings turns to Boy holding the piece of glass from the dresser. He opens his mouth and a long black tongue rolls out. It curves in the air, falls onto the broken beer bottle. The tongue sluggishly wraps around the piece of glass. Like a syrupy lasso, it draws the glass in.

Glass Wings swallows the piece in a single gulp.

A harsh sound like paper ripping meets Boy’s ears. He pulls his blanket over his head after seeing a new piece of glass tear through the flesh of the creature’s scarred back. ‘W-what do you w-want?’ he whispers, peeking out from beneath the blanket.

Girl stirs. She watches Boy whisper in the dark and wonders who he’s talking to. She sees her brother, his eyes torn apart with fear.

Glass Wings shuffles out, his wings plinking against one another. Boy notices his calves as he leaves. They’re long and narrow, shaped like picks. *He doesn’t have feet.* Instead, he has two sharp points that carry his body like a pair of stilts.

Who to tell? Boy falls backwards onto his mattress, stares up at the ceiling. Can’t tell anyone that you see ghosts, or whatever the hell they are. He rolls to his side and pulls his

bony knees to his chest.

‘What did you see?’ Girl asks.

He turns to her, catches the gleam of her eyes reflected from the light outside their window. She stares at her older brother without blinking.

‘Nothing,’ he says. ‘Shut up and go to sleep.’

‘Be nice. I heard you talking.’

‘Hell no I wasn’t. Maybe you’re dreaming.’

‘I’ve seen you do it before...’ Girl’s voice has no tinge of mockery in it. Regardless, Boy feels defensive.

‘Seen me do what?’

‘I don’t know. Talk to ghosts, talk to thin air – something like that.’

‘It’s not true!’ He squeezes his eyes shut, forgetting what he has just seen. After all, it isn’t the first time he’s encountered things that aren’t really there.

‘I don’t care if you talk to ghosts,’ she says softly. ‘I won’t tell.’

‘Good, because there’s nothing to tell. Now leave me the hell alone. He turns his back to her, faces the wall. He clenches his fists, trying his hardest not to think of the monster he’s just seen.

‘You cuss more than Mom.’

‘Yeah? Well at least I’m not racist.’

‘So you’d marry a black girl?’

‘Of course I would,’ Boy says.

‘What about an Indian girl?’

‘Sure.’

‘A Mexican? What about a Mexican?’

‘Sure, your dad is Mexican, remember?’ Boy asks, turning back to her.

‘Shut up!’

‘What? It’s true! You’re a *halfie*.’

‘I’m not a halfie!’ Girl sits up and throws her pillow at Boy.

‘Yes, you are. You’re half-Mexican, half-white. It’s not a bad thing.’ Boy immediately realizes he’s gone too far and begins to back pedal. He was only trying to poke her with a toothpick, not a dagger.

‘I hate you!’ she hisses. ‘I hate our stupid family.’

‘Hey, let me finish. What I meant to say was lots of famous people are of... um... of mixed racial heritages,’ Boy says, using the word from his social studies class. ‘You know, people like Mariah Carey, Chuck Norris, Tiger Woods. I think Prince is too.’

‘Whatever,’ Girl says.

‘Look, I’m sorry.’ He knows he shouldn’t have said the word. It’s her trigger point. He glances back to where Glass Wings was standing just moments ago and shudders. *Let it go, deal with the matter at hand.*

Girl doesn’t say anything as she turns her back to him and faces the window. He can hear her sniffing, wants to go to her bed and hug her for a moment. A part of him wants to do that, to hold his sister and show her he’s sorry, but he can’t find the mettle to do so.

Glass Wings comes to their bedroom every time Girl adds another piece to her collection. Boy never quite notices the correlation – he’s too terrified by the menacing haunt to contemplate cause and effect. He just lies there, watching as the hideous being swallows glass from the dresser. He also doesn’t speak to Glass Wings any longer in an attempt to avoid waking Girl. With each piece of broken glass the strange ghost swallows, his wings seem to grow in size. And every morning, just like the first time he visited, the piece of glass in question is back on the dresser unaltered.



Let us return then to the night that Girl has started her first period, which in actuality wasn’t her first period at all. The thought of her period disgusts Boy because having just turned eighteen, he’s still a virgin and curious to the point of terror regarding the female body. He still can’t believe how much blood was on the bathroom floor.

The monstrosity appears that night after twelve, his clangorous wings as large as they’ve ever been, laboriously scraping against the floor as he shuffles across their shared bedroom. This night, however, Glass Wings doesn’t stop at the dresser – he stops directly in front of Girl’s bed.

Boy pulls his knees to his chest when he realizes just how large the creature has become. He can smell the monster’s carrion breath; he can see the hollowness of his ghostly eye sockets. Decaying skin, menacing sneer. Glass Wings opens his mouth and jagged glass teeth sparkle in the dim light.

‘Get out of here!’ Boy hisses. He squeezes his knuckles together until they are white. Shallow breaths putter out of him. ‘G-g-go!’ He whisper-yells.

Glass Wings ignores him and removes the covers from Girl’s body with his sharp claws. ‘Stop!’ he pleads, seeing his sister’s exposed body. She’s curled in a ball, her arms around a stuffed giraffe she still sleeps with.

Glass Wings smacks his lips, lips covered in visible scars from consuming glass. The sound is loud and sickening, ravenous. His long serpent tongue flops out of his mouth. It drops onto the bed next to Girl’s legs. It rolls up her thin ankles, her bruised knees, and into her sleep shorts. It’s a quick gesture, it doesn’t take more than thirty seconds, and Boy is so stunned he can hardly blink.

Glass Wings finishes licking at the inside of her thighs and throws his head back. His tongue rolls up like a yo-yo into his salivating mouth, flickers out once more to clean his lips.

‘What the h-h-hell do you want!?’ Boy whisper-growls. He tosses his covers off. He’s

ready to do something, a little late because the ghost has already done the unthinkable. He stands to confront Glass Wings. The creature turns away without making eye contact.

Boy bares his teeth and snarls, *'Leave her alone you asshole!'*

'Who are you yelling at?' Girl asks, yawning. The end of her yawn is a soft whistle.

Glass Wings has completely vanished.

'No one!' Boy sits forcefully down onto his bed. The slats under the bed give way and the mattress sinks inward. The metal frame comes apart and the bed collapses. Girl laughs.

'Shut up! It's not funny!'

'You're so strange,' she says. 'First you're talking in the middle of the night to no one, and now you're getting all embarrassed about it.'

Boy wants to tell her the truth; he wants to tell her a ghost with glass wings and picks for legs has just slipped its tongue under her sleep shorts. He wants to tell her about the Philly Ghost, and the others he's seen, but he knows if he says that, he'll be deemed crazy. She'll tell Mom, and Mom will flip out. She'll go on a long spiel about how he plays too many video games, or how he eats too much candy and reads too many comic books.

'Go to sleep.' He tries to fix his bed in the dark and gives up.

'You can turn the light on,' Girl says. 'Fix your bed.'

'I told you to go to sleep!'

'You're such a dick!'

Boy knows he shouldn't say anything – confessions of spectral sightings have no place in a world of webcams and peer review. *What's the worst that could happen?* The worst would be Mom making him see a therapist. Since Mom can't afford a therapist, Mom would likely contact someone from Huntington. His school would assign a social worker to the case, the counselor, or ignore it all together. Mom would ask him at dinner if he's seen any ghosts and Girl, even with his ammo-word *halfie*, would have something to hold over him for the rest of his life.

Boy settles into the lopsided mattress, half suspended in air by its frame. He pulls his blanket over his head and decides to make a test. He needs to wait for Glass Wings to come back; he needs to do something to stop the monster from ever touching his sister again.



Girl wakes up the morning after she'd first cut herself feeling alien and cold. Her brother is asleep on the mattress near her. The mattress is still detached from the bed frame, making it appear as if he's sleeping on the side of a hill covered in blankets.

She sticks her hand in her sleep shorts to rub her fingers along the puckered outlines of the two words she has carved, *glass* and *halfie*. She sits up and presses her heels together to get a better look. The words don't look so good – they're crooked and jagged around the edges, pink and inflamed. A razor would do better. She suddenly feels the urge to punish herself.

Standing, she leans into the dresser mirror and notices six fresh pimples on her forehead. Using her tweezers, Girl pinches at the zits and watches white globs ooze out. The skin around each zit reddens and she squeezes harder. Her eyes water at the pain. She finishes, and is left with six bloody marks on her face. She'd never used tweezers before to pop a zit and is surprised at the pain. It's a good pain though, a numbing pain like the burning between her legs last night in the shower.

Mom calls them from the kitchen.

'Coming!' Girl yells in reply.

'Damn, too early,' her brother grumbles from his bed.

'Same time as always. Rest well?' she asks in a derisive tone.

As soon as they sit down at the table, Mom starts in. 'How's your period?' she asks. 'Did you get the tampon in right?'

'Barf,' Boy says.

'Mom, everything's fine!'

'And your face? What happened? It looks like a wasp stung you!'

Boy puts his headphones in. 'I've heard enough,' he says.

'No headphones at the table unless it's Christian music,' Mom says. Boy rolls his eyes and drops his headphones to the table.

'So? Are you going to tell me what happened to your face?' she asks.

'Nothing! Do we really need to talk about this right now?'

'You know, popping our zits can lead to permanent scars. Is that what you want?'

'Maybe,' Girl says with a slight grin on her face. 'Maybe.'



A few days pass as they normally do – quickly, but slow enough to feel as if they are being dragged through a river of Vaseline. The words on her thighs heal and one evening, the urge to cut becomes unbearable. The desire strikes while Boy is tracing pictures out of comic books and Mom is in her bedroom sleeping. She's been sleeping more and more lately, almost as if she is trying to whittle away her life through slumber.

Mom might be the saddest creature Girl has ever seen. Getting closer to fifty and she's rail-thin, her hair a drab gray. The skin on her face is porous and leathery, shrunk from too much coffee consumption and not enough water. The years of worrying and disappointment have pressed the wrinkles on her forehead together like a stack of sagging pancakes. Her green olive eyes have become black olive eyes and despite the fact that she's skinny, her jowls have started their inevitable decline towards her clavicle.

The Mexican blood in Girl, the same blood that dripped down her legs and pooled into the bathtub drain, has made her appearance rather different than that of her mother's. Girl's hair brownish-black. Her eyes wet wood brown. Her skin caramel in the winter and caramel

with a splash of milk chocolate in the summer.

She looks quite different than her brother, who has mom's blondish brown hair, green eyes and a Nordic paleness that sits loosely over his bones in the winter and turns slightly buttermilk in the summer. He's tall with flat cheeks and Girl is short with apple-cheeks. No idea where she got those and if she could sand them down, she would. Boy's skin is flawless; she's had zits since she was ten. Dark moles line her back like drops of ink from an alcoholic writer's pen. The only thing she has in common with anyone in her family is her nose: long, thin and a little curved on the end.

Girl's in their bedroom, looking at her collection of glass on their dresser. The pieces huddled together resemble skyscrapers in a ruined city. It would be nice to be a sugar ant and have the ability to crawl over the jagged pieces. Her collection looks especially beautiful when reflected back from the mirror. Two cities divided by a river of reality.

The sliver she first cut herself with is sticking out of a Mexican coke bottle (she finds this most ironic) next to the piece of broken stained glass. She picks it up and sets it back down. Today she needs something sharper. It's the best way to reopen the words between her thighs.

Girl slides past Boy on her way to the kitchen. He doesn't look up at her as she passes, so concentrated he is on what he's sketching. His tongue is out and he's gorging the pencil into the paper. Too much pressure. He'll learn finesse later; Girl can see it in his technique. He's been sketching ever since she could remember. He was the best artist at Huntington, and has already displayed some pieces at a local art show for teenagers.

She opens the drawer where Mom keeps her coupons and miscellaneous kitchen utensils. An X-Acto knife sits on top of a stack of coupons for hair dye. *Push those gray clouds away*, it says. Girl pulls the knife out and pops the blade. She thumbs it to make sure it's sharp enough.

It is.

'Where you going?' Boy asks as she walks by.

She veers to the right with her back away from him, concealing the blade. 'Bathroom,' she says.

'Number one or number two?' he asks, not looking up from his drawing. He is tracing a picture of a disproportionate comic book character with a mask pulled tight across her face.

'Number it's-none-of-your-business,' she says. 'Anyway, I'm taking a shower. Is that ok with you?'

'Fine by me.'



Glass Wings is lumbering over to his sister. He's a predator, a nightmarish freak, a gnarled being. His shoulders are heaving up and down, his breath is gargled and whispery. The moment Boy has been waiting for is at hand. Under his blankets, pressed cold against his body, is an aluminum baseball bat.

Boy was never one for sports, could never understand their appeal or the mob mentality.

He remembers Mom's boyfriend from a few years back when they lived in Tennessee. The man would be reduced to tears if the Volunteers didn't win a game. He'd wear his two jerseys for good luck, his orange Vols hat for good luck, his knee-high Vols socks for good luck, his gold Vols necklace he had specially made for good luck. He tried to get Boy into all sorts of sports, and he is the one who bought him the aluminum bat.

Mom tried to keep up with her boyfriend, tried to follow the team alongside him, but the type of obsession exhibited by men and women who have nothing else to live for aside from a sports team they have absolutely no control over is deep. Eventually, Mom too fell to the wayside, and then like always, they moved. Easier to move than accept one's fate. Same thing Girl's father, Santiago, did.

In a way, Boy was no different than the sports fanatic boyfriend. He'd made the decision at the start of seventh grade that he would pursue his art at all costs. He had seen how Mom lived, working her fingers to the bone for pennies sprinkled into her greasy palms like piss into a urinal. He'd seen how she blamed her poverty on those more or less impoverished than her. Scapegoats are a dime a dozen.

'Last chance, asshole,' Boy hisses at Glass Wings. He's trying not to recoil from the monster's sickening form, trying to focus, trying to get a good grip on his baseball bat.

Glass Wings ignores him. He shuffles closer to Girl, his massive wings scraping against the floor. He reaches his curled fingernails out and latches on to the blanket covering Girl's body.

The time is now or never.

The creature's tongue flaps out of his scarred lips. It cascades down his chin, his neck and falls onto Girl's reedy legs. His foul tongue travels up her thin brown legs and into the opening of her sleep shorts.

Blood returns to Boy's hands and he finally manages to get a good grip on the baseball bat. He squeezes it tightly, gradually taking his blanket off with his other hand.

Glass Wings finishes.

His spoiled, blood-dipped tongue crawls back into his marred lips and the fucked monster turns from the bed. Boy steadies himself on the floor behind him.

Boy's knees are wobbly, his breath short and staccato. Glass Wings pauses, seemingly aware that someone is standing directly behind him. *Too late.* Boy takes one last look at his target, and leaps forward with a swing.

The bat connects with the grotesque creature's wings. Hurlled over, Glass Wings shrieks on the floor in front of the two beds. He begins to lift his massive body weight off the ground. Boy steps around his throbbing wings, to his left side.

Glass Wings tilts his head slightly to look up at Boy. His pupils have condensed into fine red slits. He's seething, furious at Boy. His huge black tongue starts to press its way out of his lips and his brow folds into an angry V shape. His eyes flash white.

Summoning all the courage he may ever have, Boy taps Glass Wings on the cheek with his bat.

The disfigured creature snorts and a low growl emits from his throat. Boy pulls back and

swings with all his might, connecting with his jaw and sprinkling his glass teeth onto the floor. The creature gargles, tries to right himself. A stream of saliva and black blood dribbles out of his mouth.

Glass Wings lies in a heap, his broken wings shaking spastically. In one fell swoop, Boy brings the bat down onto the creature's mangy head.

Glass explodes onto the floor.

Girl wakes to find Boy standing in front of their dresser, her collection of glass smashed to tiny pieces. She watches with panic-stricken eyes as her brother slivers back into his bed, burying his head deep under the blankets as he sobs.

Boy versus Self will be released on July 31st, and is available for pre-order on [Amazon here](#).

Want a free copy? If you'd like an advanced reader copy, please e-mail me at writer.harmoncooper@gmail.com and I'll send you the book in exchange for an honest review. Thanks two million... no three!

—Harmon Cooper

Table of Contents

Pedo Drew

DEAR NSA

Tips for a DEA Sex Party

The Internet Kill Switch Fiasco

From My Cold Dead Hands

(sample) Life is a Beautiful Thing

ZERO ∞

ONE ∞

TWO ∞

THREE ∞

FOUR ∞

(sample) The Feedback Loop

(sample) BOY versus SELF

Table of Contents

Also by Harmon Cooper

Also by Harmon Cooper

Science fiction/ techno thriller:

Life is a Beautiful Thing Series: Hallucinatory cyberpunk. Meta sci-fi satire. The future is futile. Part techno thriller, part literary science fiction, *Life is a Beautiful Thing* is a series that questions what it means to be human, a book that offers a shocking glimpse into a dystopian future fueled by corporate deceit, bawdy sex and high-end intoxicants.

The Zero Patient Trilogy: Coming Fall 2015. This book will take place 200 years after *Life is a Beautiful Thing*.

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Digital Short Story Collections:

Dear NSA: A collection of politically incorrect stories about the troubled times we share. [Available on Amazon.](#)

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My Machine Doll: A short collection of satire that explores the depths of human delusion. [Available on Amazon.](#)

Tokyo Stirs: A collection of shorts that take place in India, Japan, Korea, Mongolia and Nepal. [Available on Amazon.](#)

[1] I must apologize if this paper is blunt, which, while unprofessional of me, should be duly noted for the mere fact that I care enough to make an apology. From all accounts of Healy, he was cold-hearted, slightly insane and a braggart. Lisa King exhibits his character perfectly in a chapter entitled “He’s Just Kind Of Evil” in her e-book, *The Most Followed Man in the World: An Examination of Broderick Healy’s Upvotes and Downvotes* (New York: Crown Bed Books, 2023).

[2] The path that FrogFeet took from start-up to most popular service in the world is now difficult to trace, especially after the Great Reset of 2030. For more on this subject, see my forthcoming book *FrogFeet and the Pond it Destroyed* (New York: Random House, 2033).

[3] Pedro J. Wronglook, “Vine Me,” in *Social Brewings: A Study of New Media Platforms*, edited by Chico Dwight (New York: Interpublishings, Inc. 2027) p. 242. Detailed information regarding early 21st century social media is explored in Lonnie Pocketbook’s, *All You Need to Know About Everyone Around You* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2029).

[4] Casper Freud, “Like and Dislike : Facebook’s Unique Foray into the Business of Money and the War that Followed.” *The New Yorker*, Vol. 26, No. 2. (October 2029): 97.

[5] Healy never met RedPill and BluePill face to face. All their correspondence was done

through an encrypted e-mail account that never sent outgoing messages. For more, see Malcolm Gladwell's *Healy, War and Repercussions: Say Yes to Evil Success* (Harper Collins, 2034).

[6] Why he didn't just use a photo of Shutterstock, or any other internet picture provider, is explored in Jasper Bookbun's piece, "Photoshopping Demons," in *The Philosophy of Photoshop*, edited by I-Paint McCallister (New York: Soko Publishing House 2031), p. 60.

[7] "Healy was, like, Super Lame in High School," *New York Post*, 19 October 2029, sec A. p. 1.

[8] John Lucy Crabcakes, "The Monster Inside." *Esquire*, Vol.11, No.9. (October 2032): 34.

[9] Crabcakes, 36.

[10] Peter Bunplugs. *THIS IS NOT OK: The Ultimate Guide to Workplace Dos and Don'ts* (New York, NY: Pearson Educational Publishing, 2034) p. 665.

[11] "Suicide Rates Increase Twofold," *Chicago Tribune*, 20 November 2029, sec B. p. 11.

[12] "The Comcast Blues," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 05 December 2029, sec c. p. 1.

Strangely the blues became extremely popular during the time period now known as the Internet Blackout or Dark Ages Squared. Physical blues album sales were up, as many people went through bouts of depression and denial. A blues band called *NetBlues* released songs specifically about what the two singers missed about the internet. Their album, *DarkAgesSquared*, sold more copies that fall than Kanye West's *YEEZUS TWO: IMA LET YOU FINISH*. In 2030, they collaborate with West on his album, *AIN'T NO NET: AIN'T NO YE'*. The song, "Can't Delete Me (F/U/Healy)," won collaboration of the year at the 2030 Grammy Awards.

[13] Widely believed to be the first personal computer, the Altair 8800 was designed for enthusiasts. After being featured on the cover of *Popular Electronics*, thousands of units were sold. The first programming language for the primitive machine was Microsoft's Altair BASIC.

[14] He constantly had to replace keyboards after falling asleep on them and drooling on the keys.

[15] President Richman Notyou, *Baffling Times and Clear Messages* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2033) p. 105.

[16] Conny Linguist, "Gates and the First World Internet War," *Newsweek*, Vol. 23, No. 01 (January 2030): 26.

[17] Braun Nozer, "Gates at the Gates," *The New Yorker*, Vol. 43, No. 08 (February 2030): 53.

[18] Yes, their legal names, which helped TigBit and Gates track them.

[19] "RedPill and BluePill's Father Speaks Out," *Delhi Times*, 18 November 2029, sec. B. p. 12.

[20] This agent's name has been redacted.

[21] The United States Federal Government, "Advanced Phone Line Protocol" *The Nixon Administration's Classified Documents, 1969-1971*, <http://unclassifieddocuments.us.gov/amen/letmypeoplego/gr8/comeatmebr0.html>

[22] Bull Butte, "The Quest for the Red Button," in *Killing the Internet Softly with his Tech* (New York: Seal Books, 2033) p. 143.

[23] "Don't be Social," *The Telegraph*, 31 October 1929, sec. B. p. 3.

[24] "Gates Go Cray," YouTube video, 9:32, from a private filming of a conference room call, February 28, 2030, posted by Bull Butte, April 1, 2030, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=donth8orbl8>.

[25] Dick Filler "It's Where I was Most Comfortable," *Slate*, January 15, 2030, <http://eepurl.com/bj9W25>.

[26] Yes, they do exist.

[27] 'Healy Presumed Dead,' *Herald Sun*, 16 January 2030, sec. A. p1.